Project RYUU

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In the royal capital of the kingdom ruled by Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou, few are without their secrets. Princess Satsuki, brutal warrior-mage commander of the queen’s counterinsurgency forces. Mako, who hails from the tribe of reviled outcasts consigned to the slums. Senketsu, a gregarious mutt who could pass for a small bear. Aikurou, who runs a printing press ordered to publish the propaganda of the Crown.

And then there’s the lawbreaker known only as ‘Ryuu,’ who doesn’t know exactly *why* she possesses the blood of a dragon, but would much prefer the thrills of her work in the thieves’ guild to the rebellion she’ll be embroiled in when her identity is revealed.

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The Princess and RYUU

Chapter 1: The Princess and RYUU

(Original summary) In the royal capital of the kingdom ruled by Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou, many lead double lives - few more so, perhaps, than Princess Kiryuuin Satsuki, and a middle-city thief known only as 'Ryuu.'

After slighting her superiors, the budding prodigy is given a choice - be cast out of the guild, or redeem herself with the impossible heist of the greatsword Bakuzan. As she soon discovers, her mark spends most of its time within reach of a princess who hardly wears it for show.

Fantasy AU? Trying something a little new and outside what I'm used to. I've written canon divergence/for want of a nail, but never a straight-up AU before, so we'll see how it goes. And this'll be my first time in a while writing a story with a larger cast of supporting characters to manage, so that's fun :P

This is also my first time writing a story directly into a word processor instead of writing in a spiral notebook and typing it up afterward. It's a little different, but I wanted to try it at least once (and the fact that I started working on this while AtEoD was literally on hiatus due to me forgetting to pack a spiral notebook part of it was written in might have helped sway the choice XD). 'Project RYUU' was originally a working title, but I guess it kind of stuck ^^'

You'll see that I had fun doing a few illustrations for this chapter; that said, **you might want to avoid skimming forward/scrolling down too far ahead of where you're reading to avoid illustrations with**

spoilers. For similar reasons, you probably should *not* read the end notes until you've read the chapter!

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains an instance of attempted sexual assault. Met with instant karma, but still a disturbing scene.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)
Project RYUU

~ ~

Pilot \ The Princess and Ryuu

What is this?

Glass rained down like powdered snow in her wake. The spell that had struck her had glanced off of it, skewing its composition in some curious manner as to vaporize the skylight, in a roar of golden energy that shattered the evening's shadows moments before her body shattered the floorboards.

She cobbled together the wits to squeeze her eyes shut, turning her face in a flinch away from the glimmering glass, though the motion gave her neck a twinge. A shudder, a subdued thrash of her body; trying to breathe, she coughed on the smoke of her own singed attire, cloth and good leather freshly dotted with patches of embers. And when she opened her eyes, blinking, groaning, she found that her floor, that now lay in an even, glittering dust across a lush carpet, had been someone else's ceiling.

Her tense form shook once as she registered the figure of a long-haired woman staring down at her with muted surprise - tall, well-dressed, a single dark braid trailing luxuriously down her back. A steel-gauntleted forearm was still upraised in place after shielding her face from the shower of glass. But the one on the ground was only one moment fixed on the chill blue orbs overlooking a sharp

nose before a sore realization struck her shuddering chest, and her eyes widened on the weapon sheathed at the woman's hip.

She was flat on her back, and her thoughts were scattered as the breath she fought against undoubtedly cracked ribs to reclaim. But the sight of that sword, a mere few meters away, ignited something in her, amid the rage, the ache, the humiliation of this, this - *whatever* this was.

Her voice wanted to be strong, wanted to demand, against all sense. Yet the bare reality of her stunned state made it an almost gravelly, hissing shriek, as she stretched a trembling hand with blind intensity in the direction of her objective.

"*We got her! We got Ryuu!"*

"*Protect the princess!"*

The sharp weight of someone's boot, putting a dent in her midriff, made her convulse perhaps more in reflex than pain, but was harsh even to fading senses. She found herself surrounded by a swarm of looming figures, of motif-sharing uniforms, of blades leveled at her throat and then, as more rushed in, at whatever inch of her was close by. The palace crest glinted on every breastplate.

"*Submit! In the name of the Crown!"* The man's voice was entirely too distant for where he stood, as he leveled a gloved palm down toward her face.

Oh… that's right, she thought, gazing idly at the glowing, and then sparking hand.

This is my first failed job.

A bolt of power, lashing between the eyes. It went dark.

"*Listen - no, you cut the sniffling right there, and you listen to me. Whatever happens to you, I want you to keep moving forward. Now life isn't fair in this city, kid. Maybe it is somewhere, but it ain't here. Life's gonna hit you fast and hard - when it does, it'll knock you flat on your scrawny arse. And what do you plan to do when that happens? Cry, and blame the folks around you? You do that, you decide you don't have any power, you let it hit you while you're down. So don't you dare back down. Nothing can really hurt you while you're moving forward. No matter how bad it all seems, the path to victory* is *there. Now are you gonna keep snotting all over yourself, or are you gonna put your feet on the ground and* ***find*** *it?*"

[img: http://orig06.deviantart.net/20f6/f/2016/205/1/c/ryuulogodraft2_by_hinata0321-dab60ro.png]

The night was lukewarm. Rain fell in soft, misty curtains over the capital, turning more impressive structures, and the towers on the ascent to the far-off castle spires, to a gradient of receding greys.

Somewhere in the town below, a song played. Her frown lifted to a minute degree as it caught her ears, fought its way through the oppressive darkness, not all that different from the handful of stars that glinted through patchy cloud cover above. The globe of the shoddy magelight lantern supporting the balls of her feet flickered dully in its rusted casing, straining ineffectually on a diminished supply; like many things in the lower city, it had been erected in more prosperous times. But the darkness was a two-faced old friend; the city light that could bring comfort to the noblesse, that couldn't be afforded here, was a chill threat of the monarchy's eye to fellows of her world.

A well-worn cloak trailed out behind her as she tipped forward from the streetlamp. She plunged in a spin for the earth, feet swinging down to drop silently beneath her. Not a beat after landing, she was darting like a shadow along the cobble-studded path, on feet dressed in a leathery material just heavy enough to protect, just light

enough to let her read anything from the rugged terrain outside the walls to the familiar, night-enshrouded city walks with surety.

At a halo of lantern light blossoming up ahead, and the rattle of a heavy cane's clasp on a belt, she slipped into an alley, rebounding nimbly from a wall to grapple and clamber smoothly onto a rooftop. She soon sailed over the lawman's head, tumbling onto a new set of tiles to leave him none the wiser of her passage.

This darkness was hers; the land he treaded on was hers, every bit as surely as he clung to a lantern, a lantern filled with Crown-rationed magic, to fend off the shadows. But where he was bound as any castle dog, she was freer than the curls of fine evening mist. He was barely worth her thoughts, let alone her time.

She smirked coolly. People who were worth her time… she'd be finding a few, in the lower city's alleys.

The streets here reeked of sewage; the gutters were littered with muddy refuse. The charred building below her bore marks of old damage, but stood out even so for how relatively fine it was, as one of the few remaining solid structures the shantytown had sprung up around. She dropped from the straw-thatched roof and grabbed onto a drainpipe, with care not to exert too much force on it as she slid to the ground. When her feet struck down, the darkness stirred around her. Startled figures calmed, however, when their eyes found her straightening silhouette, the sweep of a rough cloak and the wisps of messy hair drawn back into a tie, but for two locks that hung beside her face, and a fringe that sported a lustrous streak of red.

"Sorry I'm late…"

She saw forlorn faces brightening, with the name that rose to the children's lips. Her hand swept from her cloak, presenting a large bundle that had been fastened across her back.

"Meat, this time. A good bit of bread, a little fruit. Split it properly - I'll find out if you don't."

"'Course we'll share it, boss," a tawny-haired runt said. He wrinkled a grimy nose, as if offended by the suggestion that his band of urchins would do otherwise. They were an upstanding pack of rats; the brats who'd tried to mug her all those moons ago would now run odd jobs in the lower city by day, and scrape up some *rin* for their own pockets, as long as they had the energy to.

"Good man, Matarou-kun," she said, handing him the package and giving him a clap on the shoulder. "The blankets wrapping them are heavy, all together. I'll need you lot to take them off my hands, too."

"Heavy, to you? Yeah, right!" one boy jeered.

"If we must," Matarou chuckled, grinning.

"Don't start gettin' cheeky with me," she warned with a smirk, turning to go. "Your sister should be back from that job soon, yeah? Tell her hi for me."

"You bet!"

She stole off into the shadows.

"You're late."

"My bad - er, pardon me, Sensei!"

The sharply dressed man waved off her apology from where he sat. The young woman left her cloak on a hook near the bar's entrance, and deposited her staff in a rack right beside what she recognized as Sensei's own cane - an ostensible walking stick crafted for fighting, sturdy enough to break bones.

She straightened her collar over her vest jacket as she sidled between cramped tables. Other patrons of the Dancing Pig nodded or waved at her as she passed, lifting their pints cheerfully, giving congratulations for yet another recent success of which she could (and readily would) boast. The same syllables of her moniker arose from many a mouth, and she returned their names in greeting. When she finally took her seat across from him, her arm propped up on the turned chair's back, Mikisugi quirked a sleek, pale cobalt brow.

"Running around lower city?"

"You know me."

He shook his head, giving glossy locks a toss. "One hand's charity service won't toughen up those kids for the life in store for them, Ryuu-kun."

"I'll do as I please with my own pocket, Sensei," she said, crossing her arms stalwartly.

"Well, your cut is your cut…"

He sounded unconvinced; she persisted. "Mako's off on business - you know how it is with the Mankanshoku, and the other lower city clans. She asked me to check up on 'em."

"Mankanshoku? I suppose, then. If you still owe that family, take care of it quickly. In our line of work, it's unseemly to be indebted to outsiders for long."

"It ain't - it *isn't* about debts anymore. She's my friend. She'd have my back, too."

"So trusting of… *them*," he caught himself judiciously, wrinkling his nose.

"Far and away better people than the noblesse," she maintained.

"Their kind and ours don't mix, Ryuu. We never have. I'll respect your judgment, but I don't hope to see you get hurt for it down the line."

"Thanks for the consideration," she said, tipping her head back. Her eyes narrowed on dusty crossbeams. "… I been hurt before. I don't need you tellin' me what to look out for."

He studied her a moment, until two steaming plates of noodles were slid onto the wooden table between them.

That changed her tune. "Your pocket?" she said, sitting forward.

"I *am* your senior. I went ahead and ordered your usual; I hope you don't mind - hey, hey!" he scolded, as she'd already popped apart a pair of slender wooden sticks and begun snapping down cuts of grilled meat.

Pausing, she straightened her back and sheepishly swirled the heap of thick noodles left on her plate. The man who had taught her to read - and then taught her a lot more - wouldn't have her carry herself poorly in his presence. Mikisugi Aikurou was a prestigious gentleman of the guild, and a seemingly ageless being who was her senior by a healthy, if uncertain, number of years.

"So what's the occasion, Sensei?" she inquired, attention lilting toward a peaceful melody from a bard at the head of the room. She focused on that, intending to pace herself on her meal. "You hear about my last job?"

He finished a bite of his own before he spoke. "What's this? Do I need a reason to treat one of my adorable disciples to dinner and a drink?" He propped his chin on the back of a hand, silver eye glinting with a quick wink. "I'm getting a date with a cute girl out of it, to boot. Come to think of it, how old are you now? Eighteen?"

"*Nineteen* . You know that, old man," she said good-naturedly.

He whistled. "How time does fly…" His eyes flicked over her attire. "Though it is a blessing to have inherited so many of my skills… Albeit impeccable, I daresay you've absorbed my fashion sense a touch too directly, Ryuu. You ought to practice dressing as a gentlewoman rather than a gentleman once in a while."

"Those clothes are harder to move around in. Flimsy, too. And the shoes alone are deathtraps."

"Perhaps not so, with *practice* ? I'm afraid if you ever need to impersonate a noblewoman, you'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"When my acting skills are on par with yours, I bet I can just impersonate a man, easy."

"And your table manners?"

"They're great, when I need 'em! You drilled me with lesson after lesson until they got your stamp of approval, remember?" She shrugged. "Besides, you know I hate dealin' with noblesse. So why should I have to mimic their pomp and finesse in my spare time? The experts like you and the *boss* can handle jobs like that." Her lip curled. "Heck, with his folks' shipbuilding fortune, the boss is practically one of 'em himself."

"*Our* boss? Come on." He lowered his voice. "He's a thug, Ryuu, and he's more than a bit tacky, but even he can put on a convincing act, when the job demands it. And versatility is what *makes* a hand, in the finer aspects of our profession."

"A big-name slob like him can't even see the value of things anymore - can't appreciate it. You're ten times the hand he is; I'm *at least* five."

"Ryuuko-!"

"*Don't* use that name," she warned, eyes immediately chilled. Her mentor calmed, loosening the grit of his teeth.

"That name is the name the gods gave you, isn't it? Your *true* name. It's the one my old friend wanted for you, and he would never address you any differently."

"It ain't like he bothered raising me. Far as I'm concerned, all he ever gave me is the blood in my veins. What good do I have for his shitty names?"

"Should I apologize on his part, then, for sending you off with that caravan to protect you? Should I be sorry you had the misfortune of being raised by me, and taken into the guild?"

"You're puttin' words in my mouth now…"

"You've brought amazing talent to our number, Ryuu. And I'm proud of you for rising to prominence in the guild as quickly as you have. You've made your own life here. But your unruly behavior isn't only holding *you* back - it reflects negatively on me, on the boss, and all your family here in the brotherhood. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah…"

"Look at me. Do you understand that selfish actions can hurt everyone here?"

"Wh-what even is this, suddenly?"

He raised a serious brow.

Her lip wrinkled. "I get it."

"Alright." He reached under the table, lifting a woven sack that dropped with a heavy thud, and metal clink, to its surface. "Then what do you have to say about this?" he asked nonchalantly, opening it.

Her eyes grew; she was on her feet in an instant, hand darting toward the slender knife at her belt. But she paused at the simmering

remorse in Mikisugi's eyes, as the man remained calmly seated before her.

In her moment of hesitance, metal like ice rested behind the line of her jaw. "Let's not get hasty, Ryuu," warned a gruff voice behind her.

"Oh, son of a-,"

"I've got two useful pieces of information for you. One: I value the Sensei's life far more highly than yours. Two: I don't care whose special little girl you are. You pull that knife, I'll stick you like a pig."

The bard's tune had cut out sharply. She glared not-so-literal daggers back at Tsumugu - and throughout the bar, people sprang up, tables or chairs toppled with quick motion, hands went for knives - and everyone froze, unsure of who to attack. Ryuu's eyes made order of the chaos; a loose ring of patrons had encircled their table, backs to them, prepared to fend off interference. They'd been planted, same as Kinagase.

"This was under your bed, Ryuu," Mikisugi said soberly.

"That stuff wasn't even the job objective - it was just luck. I forked over every rin I was sent for…"

Mikisugi folded the sack shut over the confiscated treasures - jewelry, old, heavy gold coins, and a gem-studded dagger with an elegant guard twined around its grip - all nestled curiously in a bed of pale flower petals and tree bark. "You know the code. Withholding loot is theft from the brotherhood. Objective or not, you turn in what you take, and you get your cut in rin. If the guild can't account for what's passed through its hands, and check for loose ends we might need to tie up behind you…"

"I know, it's bad."

"Bad? It might slide if it were more like the coins you'd been filching for your collection - *yes*, we long since noticed that. But this is worth

more than the target items for the job you nabbed them on!"

"Forty-eight thousand rin," Tsumugu growled disdainfully, "but who's counting?"

"F-forty-eight thou?" she echoed, numb.

"Quite a bit to hide from the guild, Ryuu," Tsumugu said, while the young woman's eyes flickered uncertainly across the bar. Mikisugi saw her tense - cornered, considering routes of escape.

"Don't make this harder for yourself than it will be, Ryuu."

"Okay - I got it. I screwed up. I won't do it again. Just - don't tell him, please-,"

"Don't tell who, exactly?"

All eyes edged toward the man who strode down a stairway into the bar, trailed by four bodyguards. He was dressed in a combination of silks and furs that would have been too garish for most noblesse tastes, and his wide grin bared two glinting, golden rows of teeth. When his hands smacked together, the clack of jewelry overpowered the clap itself.

"That's right, lil' Ryuu - looks like someone's been set up!"

Ryuuko scowled at Mikisugi, eyes watering in fury. "You…?"

He looked away, combing a hand anxiously through his hair. "I'm not even the one who found these things, Ryuu. I'm just the one who was chosen to be here to convince you not to fight."

The boss sniggered; his voice was cold. "Everyone, weapons down. Clear the bar."

He snapped his fingers. Those who had been planted from the start, preselected for their loyalty, remained as they were. The rest abandoned their food and drink, and rushed to do as told.

"You's a lot of things, Ryuu, but I ain't think *stupid* was one of 'em."

The boss sat in a chair someone had pulled out and dusted off for him. Standing, he would have been a head taller than Ryuuko. He had distinctive orange hair, a golden monocle, and an unreasonable number of rings weighing down his fingers. She knew he was a capable thief and con man in his own right; but the bright, frilly way he dressed on his own time, he wasn't suited for rooftop running, much less any manner of job.

Mikisugi leaned against a wall, arms crossed, a frown set deeply on his face. Tsumugu stood near two of the boss's goons at his side, while two more held Ryuuko's arms in firm grips, above the rope that bound her hands behind her back. A handful of other thieves - the council, of which Mikisugi was a part - watched silently from throughout the dusty basement room.

Ryuuko's nose twitched as the man stood to stride toward her. "Boss Takarada. Perhaps now is not the time to say, but if I may be so bold, you ought consider easing up on the perfume. It's making me nauseous-,"

He spat sharply; the glob of spittle struck the center of her forehead. She bristled, lips drawing back from her teeth - she lunged - and the men at her sides caught her short. Takarada's cane slipped from his belt to crack her over the cheek, snapping her head aside. Blood plitted to the dirty floor.

She turned her eyes back on him, livid. The man on her left put a solid fist in her stomach; the one on the right kicked out her knees while she wheezed in pain. Takarada's boot struck her unguarded stomach again, spiteful, shaking her where she knelt.

"Imagine my confusion, after your brilliant heist, to hear of the report the Fukuroda household has filed with the lawmen. Why, they're claiming fifty thou more in valuables was lost than what our own wily Ryuu submitted to the guild!"

"Forty-eight," Ryuuko pointed out helpfully. She received a swift knee to the kidneys for her trouble.

Takarada turned, walking toward another of his men. "And what have you done with it? Not pawned it off, not hidden it carefully. You tucked it under your bed." He clicked his tongue. "I woulda' thought the protégé of Mikisugi Aikurou-san to be clever, if not loyal. Whatcha' have to say in your defense?"

Her shoulders shook before she put on her best shit-eating grin. "I really, *really* like gold."

He sighed, reaching out to take the implement his subordinate offered before walking back toward her. His tone was dangerous. "Tell me, Ryuu. Though your instruction on the Code was so evidently lax, do you at least recall the punishment for stealing from your boss?" he hummed, testing the sledgehammer's weight in his hands.

She shook out another laugh. She worked a dry mouth for a moment, and swallowed her pride. "… Please don't break my legs."

"Hm? I didn't catch that, Ryuu."

"Please," she said firmly, "do not break my legs and throw me in Hakuryou River, Boss Takarada."

"You tellin' me you *don't* want your knees busted?"

"No. No, sir, I don't."

"You don't wanna die like a rat?"

"No, sir."

"Then why didn't your grimy fingers fork over my loot?" he asked, leaning down in her face. "You couldn't tell what was rightfully mine? Your brain couldn't even connect the natural consequence to your actions? Is it because you're simple?"

She was trying to control her breathing, but it was quick; the way he was leaning over her was too much like a challenge. She was seeing red.

But it wasn't even a challenge; it was a show of dominance. She steadied herself and spoke. "Yes, sir, Boss Takarada. I'm quite the swiving dolt."

"Not even. You know what you are?" He shook a finger at her. "You're a *bitch* that gets one taste of scraps and thinks she deserves a spot at the table. But they's different kinds of people in this world, Ryuu. What you're scarfin' down your greedy throat - it ain't for you, and it'll never *be* for you. You get your fair share to get by. You even accept a treat if you're *given* it. You *don't* steal from the hand that feeds you. Understand?"

"Completely…"

He smiled. She resisted flinching as the sledgehammer cracked into the floor at her side.

"I ain't gonna break your legs, Ryuu. Your skills are valuable to this guild; I'm convinced all you need is to learn a little respect for the way things work here. If a dog can be trained, why can't you?" He gripped her chin, lifting her glinting eyes to his. "You think you's a real thief? Getcha' ass ready for a real job… as soon as you're back on your feet. You're the standout pupil of Mikisugi Aikurou; you're *at least* five times the thief I am, right? I'll expect no less than a flawless performance, if you wanna keep your place here."

Dropping her chin, he returned to his chair, lounging back and crossing his legs. Ryuuko took a breath as the boss lifted a hand.

"Mikisugi-sensei!"

"Wh-what is it?"

"Take care of Senketsu!"

He nodded mutely.

Tsumugu walked up to the woman, cracking his knuckles with a soft smile as her captors hoisted her up by the arms.

"Sorry about this, Ryuu-kun," he said, as the other two guards neared beside him.

"No, you're not."

He grinned. "You got me," he said, and drew back.

CRACK!

She bided her time under a hail of punches and kicks and eventually stomps. She couldn't have lost consciousness quickly enough.

Shut eyes snapped open, round, at the sound of a door shutting somewhere above.

When Mikisugi ambled down the stairs, he met the eyes of a young woman standing on a cot, still clad only in shorts and bandages, brow furrowed, hackles up, and fingers splayed like claws prepared to gouge.

"You're awake, I see."

"How long was I out?" she demanded, radiating hostility. Her eyes found the shadowed shape of her staff, straight and uniform, propped against a wardrobe in the corner of the room.

"A little less than a full day. Impressive, for the beating you took, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised… Sit down, will you?"

"Where's Senketsu?"

"At the printing press. He was crying for you all night, and I couldn't find it in me to throw him out in the rain. He's safe - and so are you.

Please, don't run before you hear me out."

She eyed him warily.

"I didn't sell you out. You know that."

"Do I, now?"

"I should hope so," he said, wincing to the slightest degree.

Grudgingly, she sat. "If we're on the same side, why are you wearing that? Decoration?" she asked bitterly, pointing to his vest.

He tugged at a white cravat. "I could shed a few layers, if you prefer - oho, you mean this?" he joked, plucking the pale flower from his breast pocket. Seeing his humor failed to take, he sobered. "I'm sorry," he said, setting it aside before he neared, "but I couldn't be sure you'd refrain from attacking long enough for me to explain."

Walking closer, he pulled a chair from a desk to sit by the cot. Ryuuko inspected her surroundings; trained ears caught the sound of a hammer rapping on metal above. "A forge… This isn't Tsumugu's place?"

"It's closer than yours or mine. We didn't want to haul you halfway across middle city, in the state you were in."

"*He* helped put me in that state!"

"He's not a bad guy, Ryuu. He was-,"

"Following orders? With a little too much relish, if you ask me."

"You two are worse than children…"

She turned her head. "… Thanks for keepin' Senketsu. You… didn't betray me, huh?"

He looked away. "I helped Takarada confront you because I assumed you value the life you've made here enough that you're willing to suffer a bit to protect it. You wouldn't be able to do that if you lost your cool, or did something rash. But you are a special case, Ryuu; unlike most of us, if you chose to, you really could leave this city - leave the kingdom altogether - at any time. You could survive out there…"

"But I didn't run. I put up with it, like you figured."

"I'm just glad you didn't make a scene out of it. You could touch up your acting, though - your 'fear' wasn't all too convincing."

"I wasn't about to let anyone smash my knees either way."

"The… *alternative* you're suggesting is unfavorable and you know it. As it is, you got him to give you a chance with this redemption job, but a little believable groveling would have gone a long way in shortening your beating. The job you've got, though, might have already been set… And he gave you a time limit that would have been a lot more unreasonable, if you'd been out for as long as you should've been."

"What's this job, then, anyway?"

Mikisugi's smile was wry. "Once you hear it, you might want to skip town after all."

A brow quirked in annoyance. Mikisugi sighed.

"You're after a sword."

"That's it? From which House?"

"It's not a noble household, per se…"

"Middle city, then? He knows I hate takin' from middle city folks!"

Mikisugi was quiet a long moment. "… It's no middle city job, Ryuu."

She blinked. "Who in lower city would have a katana worth our time? Worth the *trouble*, at that? We don't mix with them; we sure as hell don't *pick fights* with 'em, right?"

"Gods, no! No one's keen on breaking *that* agreement."

"Enough with the riddles, then. It ain't lower, middle, or upper city. Where is it? You know I'll nab it. I ain't ever failed or backed down from a job before, and I'm not starting anytime soon."

"That's some spirit you've got… Alright. My one and only Ryuu is on the job? I'll tell Takarada the good news. As for whom you're stealing from…"

The knight felt the punch of the blunt lance lodged squarely beneath his chest - and was unseated, launched with a wail from his steed.

His landing was harsh; his helmet had gone careening somewhere during his flight. He folded an arm across the heavy practice armor, rolling onto his side with a muted curse and a wheeze. With a light clinking of armor, his adversary dismounted a tall, snow-colored mare, and strode smoothly toward him.

"Are you alright?"

"Y-yes. I'm fantastic, m'lady." He dug his fingers into sweat-logged, forest-green locks. "Don't mind me…"

"Listen to the mountain monkey!" a woman's snide voice called from the sidelines. "The only thing you bruised up is his pride!"

"A *knight* should not be weaker than his *princess* !" the young warrior shouted, sitting up sharply to point at the commenter. "Mind your tongue, vilest serpent-woman!"

"Oh, give it a rest," another spectator drawled. "Honestly, why not take up a different trade? One where you could offer something to

our humble Circle? To say nothing of riding, shooting, and jousting, even the lady's swordsmanship puts yours to shame."

"You picking fights, Inumuta?!"

"If you'd like, bring it. But I thought your concern was in besting our lady?"

The knight's eyes edged back toward the kingdom's princess, who patiently offered a hand from above. He shook his head rapidly, clearing the last few stars. "A duel! I want another practice duel next! This time, for sure-!"

"SANAGEYAMA!!" a massive voice blared across the yard; several horses startled. The hulking figure of the captain of Enforcers stood with heavy arms crossed, and a censuring scowl split his tan face. "These repeated challenges to the lady are unbecoming of a man of your station!! Show some DIGNITY in defeat, will you?!"

"That's enough, all of you," the princess said, cool but imperious, silencing their squabbles as well as the chatter of other knights that hung around the castle yard to spectate. "I will not bar a soldier from striving to improve himself. And Inumuta - don't patronize him. Sanageyama is unrivalled among his fellows in the Queen's Own; his position is every bit as valuable to us as your and Jakuzure's specialties among the court sorcerers, and Gamagoori's rank in the Enforcers."

"M'lady!" the four answered at once, bowing their heads as she strode to the fence that marked the edge of the jousting ring.

"I daresay the four of you would have a reasonable chance of defeating me, together - a feat that dozens of ordinary soldiers could not pray to match. That fact alone is proof of your worth."

"M'lady!"

She stopped before another young man; the fair-haired alchemist bowed his head with a smile as he returned the weapon he'd held onto during the contest. It rested in a long, silver-white sheathe, straight, thinner at the end than at the gold-plated, masterfully engraved and gem-studded hilt. She reached out to take its weight easily in one gloved hand.

"Your sword, Satsuki-hime."

"Thank you, Iori," she said, returning it to her belt.

"The princess. *The* princess? Of the kingdom? That's whose sword I gotta' nab?"

"It's a bit late for second thoughts," Mikisugi reminded her, striding down the stone steps to rejoin her in the mid-morning light. He looked back as a window a ways off along the estate wall rattled; a lower-ranking thief dressed as a servant poked his head out, gawking at the perfectly healthy Ryuu, who waved with a crooked, sickly-sweet grin. The lackey could report *that* to Takarada Kaneo, if he hadn't believed Mikisugi's report of her recovery…

The young woman snorted, turning to join her sensei as he passed, and they headed back toward a cobbled street lined with cluttered buildings. "No prissy royal's gonna give me one lick of trouble. But she'll have to have powerful people around her… I'll need to scrape up some intel for this one. Does she ever leave the thing anywhere, I wonder, or keep it by her side? Or her schedule, when she leaves the palace… *Does* she leave the palace? And what sort of guards to look out for…"

"Ryuu… how much do you know about the kingdom's princess?"

"What's there *to* know? The noblest of nobles - a swine of all swine. I've duped a lot of people, Sensei. Sneaking around the castle district will be one thing, but a royal airhead who wears a sword for decoration is about the last person I'm worried about."

"Allow me to set something straight for you, then. You're right about one thing - the regime is brutal as you know. The queen is ruthless, her enforcers are savage, and the castle ranks are loaded with skilled warriors and advanced spellcasters. If you trip an alarm, you won't be getting out unscathed. But even considering all of that, the *last* person you want to cross paths with carelessly is the Kiryuuin princess."

"So, what - she knows how to swing a sword?"

"Ryuu," he groaned in exasperation. "You never can just take friendly advice on how dangerous something is? It's a foul habit. Remember when you nearly got ripped up by a Bloodthirster for it?"

"Don't even! I had that bastard under control, start to finish."

"Darkstriders, then. I say, 'they're bad news, Ryuu, take care to avoid them.' It took getting your arse handed to you for you to believe me!"

"To be fair, that took me by surprise. We were pretty even after that initial shock, though! And it was more'n worth it in the end."

"It'll only take one time not to live beyond the 'initial shock,'" he said, frowning. "Ryuu. I know you're good at fighting, I know you're tough, but remember what we are. If we're fighting on a job, things are *already* bad. As far as our princess is concerned, I want you to be every bit as wary of her as you would be of a Darkstrider elite."

"A *royal* . A royal is that much of a problem?"

"She's dangerous."

"*I'm* dangerous," she pointed out. "So you're sayin' she's a threat to me? The Underworld's Ryuu?"

"A name's just a name, Ryuu. It won't change the facts. But if the only thing you'll heed is a reputation, I'll leave you be with this: Beware of the *Junpakko* ."

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/d0ed/f/2016/228/b/2/kiryuuin_satsuki_hime__color__by_hinata0321-dae5lmy.png]

[PURE WHITE TIGER]

The princess turned, dark braid swaying behind her and ice blue eyes locking on the stout figure jogging up the hall before he called her name.

"Satsuki-hime!" he panted. "I have news that may be of import to you!"

"Oho," Inumuta Houka murmured at her side, a thin smile curling on his lips. "Master Kuroido at last sees fit to report the tip he received hours prior?"

"Hush," Satsuki chided softly before the man came into earshot, chainmail clinking with his steps. "Head of Enforcers," she greeted, nodding as he stopped to bow at the waist. "What is this news you speak of?"

"I've uncovered a most dastardly scheme, princess! A *thief* has set sights on the Sacred Sword Bakuzan!"

Satsuki quirked a heavy brow somehow delicately, feigning surprise. "A thief, you say? I see little issue. If a fool ruffian should manage to evade the castle guard skillfully enough to come within my blade's reach, I should quite shortly resolve the issue myself."

"I - I have no lack of faith in your ability to do so, my Princess. But the castle guard will not have you made to quarrel with commoner

scum! That said, this thief has grown notorious throughout the upper city. She's rumored to possess incredible powers!"

"Oh?" Satsuki said, interest piqued - if mildly.

"Aye - she's evaded my Enforcers for quite some time, but today my tireless investigation yields fruit. Soon the thief called Ryuu, a brazen menace to this city, will be crushed before the castle's justice," he said, clenching his fist with a grin of relish.

"May the might of the Crown bring your triumph," Satsuki said, watching him bow and turn to go.

"Investigation," Inumuta scoffed under his breath, almost offended, as he and the lady continued their walk toward the courtyard. "I suppose that sounds more impressive than admitting a golden nugget was practically dropped upon his doorstep. And if his primary concern lay in protecting you, he wouldn't have omitted the day that this Ryuu is expected to strike."

"And her 'incredible powers' - is there basis in that, or more blustering for Kuroido to boast of after her capture?"

"I've already told you what the mice whisper, m'lady. There is no shortage of rumors, but the nature of her power is a mystery I should require more time to crack. If it is so incredible, that I can't get any tabs on it means almost no one truly knows, and those who know guard it well." He shrugged. "What's certain is that she's made a joke of upper city Enforcement, and dragged Kuroido's name through the muck in her wake. The months since he was put on her case can't have been gentle with his pride." The spy clicked his tongue, shutting his eyes above an amused smile.

"Kuroido will be ousted as the louse he is someday," Satsuki said confidently, "and an upstanding Enforcer like Gamagoori will have his time. She won't be walking away with my Bakuzan, but it would be fortuitous indeed if this Ryuu proved competent enough to give the slip to whatever welcoming party he arranges for her…"

"Information is power, M'lady," Inumuta said, humor fading. "And the girl will have no idea just how much has been placed in the Enforcers' hands. Kuroido gets things done when he stands to benefit. With the sheer level of firepower at his disposal, mysterious abilities or not, I doubt this Ryuu will stand a chance."

Satsuki's brow furrowed; she resisted an urge to run a hand through her neatly kempt hair. "To choose the name 'Ryuu'… such temerity, for a thief poor enough to be cast aside by her compatriots."

"I haven't yet confirmed that - but yes, it is the most logical explanation for the thoroughness of the informant's knowledge. So someone in her guild has it out for her; she's still a skillful thief, from what we know. And it's a rather daring choice of names, wouldn't you agree?"

"It is foolhardy. There is no cleverness to tempting the Crown's ire with such a name."

She paused at a great arched window, looking out over the city bathed dull orange in late afternoon sun.

"Certainly not the crown held by Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou."

She steadied the shoulder armor over her jacket, testing its comfortable weight. The long ends of the sash connecting the two shoulder pieces went across her torso over a fitted suit, crossing again to circle her waist and tie off smoothly at her hip. Leather armor protected her upper legs, her thighs; a long plate was fastened to her right shin, and an armguard to her left forearm. Aside from these, her only defense would be cloth.

She shouldn't need more than that.

The kingdom's greatest concentrations of firepower… so if I'm caught, I'm screwed either way. She twisted her torso one way and the other in a stretch, checking that all was secure. *I ain't plan on*

getting caught, so no sense weighing myself down, right? She gave a wry grin. If only the Arcana took to cloth… But enchantments that clung well to metal and other materials didn't seem to keep with cotton or wool. If they did, light armor options would be revolutionized. Going to battle in magic clothes; she chuckled at the thought.

A knock came to the door. "Yeah," she called, adjusting fingerless gloves as Mikisugi entered the room. She'd used his basement as a center of operations while she plotted and gathered information the last short few days; the man surveyed the maps and notes sprawled across the table and cot, messily scribbled and revised plans pinned to the wall. It was a sensible choice, to work from here; his building was equipped with stronger, finer Muddling spells than most thieves could afford. A secure base was crucial in the planning of a job.

Ryuu had never channeled so much energy into preparation into a single job, he knew, eyeing books she'd snagged from his library upstairs. Inside all day researching and plotting, out in the evenings haggling for information from sources…

"What's up?"

He snapped out of his reverie. "Have you slept?" he asked. "Actually, have you eaten all day?"

"Yes and yes," she said, smirking. "I'm good, Sensei."

He wrought up a smile. "You'd better be."

"Don't be gettin' all teary eyed on me, old man. My reputation's at stake! I'll show the Boss a heist for the ages."

"Ryuu… If you're detected, I want you out of there, hear? Even if you can't nab the sword, you get out." He gripped her shoulders, hands resting on light armor. "I don't care *what* you have to do."

She caught his meaning, eyes widening briefly as she did. "Sensei…"

His hand clapped her on the shoulder now. "Do me proud, out there. Remember your training. Be light on your feet. Be patient, and check for Watcher spells. Remember the signs of Muddling. And-,"

Ryuuko ducked under his arm, slipping past him in a flash of dark blue hair and snagging her weapon from the corner by the door. With a deft move of her hand, the short staff - bright crimson in color, holding a dull but curious sheen - was poised at her back. "I'll be back later, Sensei."

When she brought her fist up to eye level, he nodded. Their forearms met once, with a sure thud.

Ryuu turned, and vanished through the doorway.

[img: http://orig08.deviantart.net/b3f4/f/2016/178/b/f/ryuu_on_the_job__matoi_ryuuko__project_ryuu__color_by_hinata0321-da7wlv4.png]

The throne room was spacious, cast in pristine marble floors, stained glass windows, ornate, sweeping curtains, and twin rows of finely sculpted pillars that towered to the arched ceiling above; every inch of the place was dusted on a daily basis, Satsuki knew.

She knelt, head down as she delivered her report. Sanageyama had led a company of knights to clear out bandits in the western reaches of the Crown's land, beyond the city walls, and tested a paralyzing concoction Iori had devised; the mission had been a success, completed swiftly and skillfully, and the troublemakers were indeed mere bandits, not members of the elusive rebel factions as they had feared. Iori was revising his formula as they spoke.

"We have *prisoners* young Iori could easily test his concoctions on, my dear."

"Since they are intended for weapons applications, it is preferable to test the poisons' effects in a more practical setting."

"I suppose…" A sultry chuckle sounded in front of princess. "And that hooligan of yours does fine work, doesn't he? I'm glad I was not mistaken in allowing you to take him in. How well you've tamed him… I wonder if he enjoys throwing his weight around, against thugs and highwaymen as pitiful as he once was."

"He will obey my commands, and carry out the iron will of the Crown. He harbors no sentiments for his old life any longer."

"I see… Very well. The bandit you took under your wing and molded into a knight… The metalworker's boy you drafted into the Enforcers, and the budding con artist you plucked from the slums for his potential as a mage… I hope to continue to hear great things of your 'Circle,' my dear." The word was dipped in scorn, stinging sweetly in Satsuki's ears.

"Yes, mother."

"That shall suffice, then… Wait. Kuroido has been blathering about capturing that thief he's been chasing, correct? One that now seeks your Bakuzan, no less!"

"You are correct. She is expected to attempt to infiltrate the castle sometime this evening."

The queen rose with a scoff from her throne, the motion silent but for the flutter of her dress. Satsuki's breath quickened, and steadied again with a practiced effort, as she heard the smooth tap of heels approaching her.

A white slipper rested on the floor beneath Satsuki's face; the feathery frills of the lower hem of a matching dress swayed above it, and settled.

"Raise your head, Satsuki."

She did as told. Immediately, a hand drifted out to caress her cheek.

Kiryuuin Ragyou's brightly painted lips smiled down at her. Platinum hair, bound up and slightly back in the shape of a cone, shone with splashes of impossibly multicolored highlights. Her face was much like her daughter's, sharp and coolly beautiful; but the carmine eyes beneath formidable, tapering silver brows glinted with something like humor. Her gaze was not so much cuttingly sharp as precise, as it traversed Satsuki's features with smooth deliberateness - a gaze like a knife pressed just firmly enough to cause discomfort, just light enough not to draw blood.

Satsuki kept her eyes on hers, her face impassive, though her breath had softened to almost nothing.

"Mother…" But a thumb pressed lightly to her lips, instructing her to be silent. The queen's teeth flashed in a lithe smile as she spoke.

"Perhaps I should keep you *close* this evening… as a precaution."

Satsuki's brow furrowed slightly, feigning hurt, with a small spark in her eye to show mild indignation. She hazarded to speak against the finger, when it didn't move. "One incapable of fending off a lowlife commoner should hardly consider herself fit to be called your heir."

Ragyou held her gaze a moment, before giving a delicate sigh of relent. Her hand traced Satsuki's jawline in moving away. "My blood does run through your veins, even if you *are* merely… well," she gestured vaguely at Satsuki to punctuate the comment, lips curling in the slightest sneer. "Run along, then, my dear."

"Yes, Mother."

She paused on the ladder, lowering her head in a moment of focus.

Still no barrier spells, no Watching spells. She would know if there were; however skillfully the spell was placed, magic in any potent

concentration made her ears itch. It had been an annoying - but unavoidable - quirk of working at Sensei's place.

A gloved hand's bare fingers pushed a hatch open, after testing for creaks. She peered out, encouraged by the shadows around her exit point, and she climbed noiselessly out of the maintenance tunnel, into the light, misting rain.

Not bad at all, she thought, surveying her surroundings further as she shut the hatch. Well - a trip through the sewage system to get to the right tunnel hadn't been delightful or anything, but the tidbits one of her informants had managed to get from a former architect had been worth every rin she'd paid for them; the outer wall was well behind her, the dark shape of the barracks stood near but not concerningly near, and the magelight that lit major paths and structures didn't reach the corner she'd emerged in.

In the past, it was said, the arcana had been stronger in the realm; even commoners had often possessed them. A hundred years ago, the thought of a state's castle lacking a radius of Watching magic at the very least would have been a laughable one. But now, magic was precious; large, powerful spells like that had become too costly to uphold.

Perhaps it was also true that the castle guard was capable enough to render barriers unnecessary - or that it was rare for some poor fool to be loony enough to attempt an infiltration.

She shook her head. Light feet crossed dirt, then grass, as she made her way further toward the back of the castle, where she should enjoy more shadows to work with.

Satsuki's meetings with the Circle in her private study, ostensibly to discuss their ongoing campaign against the various rebel factions that lurked about the kingdom, tended to invigorate the princess. Rather, they did not excite or thrill, but fortified her with purpose, as if

polishing her steel exterior while certainty, and ambition, burned formidably from her eyes.

So Jakuzure Nonon noticed each time her princess seemed to drift from the discussion, idly sipping the tea her elderly manservant had prepared. The boys, for all their bickering, probably noticed as well when Satsuki didn't reprimand them.

"Milady?" Gamagoori ventured as they began wrapping up. "If I may be so bold, you seem preoccupied. If you are concerned about this talk of a thief, rest assured that the Enforcers will not permit you to come to harm. And I speak not only for myself in saying that if you would like, the Circle will gladly stay at your side."

Sanageyama snorted. "Yeah, like a biiiiig slumber party!" he said, but nodded in agreement with Gamagoori's suggestion.

Satsuki was alert again. "Thank you for your concern, but I suffer no apprehension toward this thief. If we are done here, you are free to go on about your evenings."

Jakuzure hung back as the others bowed and filed out; of course they noticed (and Sanageyama shot a look), but said nothing as they realized her wish to speak privately.

"What is it, then?" Satsuki asked the pink-haired mage. Unlike the others, Nonon was of noble birth; she had known the princess since their youth, even before she had moved from her family's estate to the castle, to hone herself as a court mage.

She leaned against Satsuki's varnished oak desk, giving a pointed look. "You're tired, aren't you?"

"This is nothing, Nonon. There's simply a lot on my mind."

"And you've been working and training dawn to dusk, day in and day out. That's what being *tired* is, Satsuki-hime. Not a sign of weak ambition - just something that happens to all of us."

She sighed when Satsuki did not concede. "You're behind on your lessons, aren't you?" she remarked, altering her approach.

Satsuki blinked in surprise - and ducked her head, chuckling. "It's the middle of the night, Nonon."

"And you're going to spend all of the day going nonstop again, aren't you? Come on - if you're up for it, let's play a little. Meet you in the music room?"

"Alright," Satsuki said, standing. With a thanks for the tea, she dismissed Soroi for the night, retrieved her instrument's case from her room, and headed down the hall.

This job would get a lot hairier if the princess was up at odd hours - or if she, and her Bakuzan, were away from her room altogether. If she had to wait around in a patience game, her chances of being discovered would only climb.

Ryuu tried not to worry about that, as she picked at the lock on a window. This type? Then in that case…

Smiling behind her mask, she slipped inside.

Immediately she leapt, as light poured into the room. With impressive speed she was perched atop a wardrobe, breath still as a pale young woman in simple night dress shut the door of a communal bathroom behind her, and blew out the candle in her hand. The light had been dim, but seeing it stream from the doorway, after the turn of a knob, had sent a thrill up Ryuuko's spine.

Servants worked odd hours, of course; it was anyone's guess how many were awake in the area. Ryuu berated her racing heart silently as the girl walked to the window, trepidation showing briefly in sleepy eyes as she pushed it shut. It locked automatically with a soft click.

Servants' quarters in the great royal palace, Ryuu thought with bitterness in her gut as she watched the girl collapse onto a cot. *Doors and windows lock from the outside only.*

Much as she hated to admit it, information was as important as her skill, for a job like this. This wing had been repurposed into servants' quarters; she'd learned that any living spaces designed specifically for lower castle staff, if they had windows at all, wouldn't have ones that opened. She'd selected this wing as the optimal point of entry.

She traversed the hall outside in a fast, low gait, not quite a run. Dodging the notice of a guard and his lantern was natural, smooth, same as it was whenever she ever crossed paths with a lawman. Blinded by his own light, he didn't catch a figure slipping through the shadows along the wall. Still her heart raced well before she should have become out of breath as she continued on her way. She mentally traced what she'd been able to gather of the castle's layout, and the direction of the princess's quarters.

This is it, she thought, eyes adjusting rapidly again as she ducked into the purer darkness of a tight, spiral stairway. *I'm inside the castle.*

Satsuki gave a contented sigh, eyes shut as she lowered the bamboo flute from her lips.

"That's a good smile," Nonon said. She showed a rare softer side, for the princess.

"I may have needed this, truthfully," Satsuki admitted. She knew her playing was amateurish at best, beside her friend's mastery with the more complex, double-reed flute Nonon had selected. But their playing was peaceful, quickly becoming not so much a lesson as recreation; the melodies proved somehow calming to her.

"I know things are crazy, Princess," Nonon said, "but you still have to slow down sometimes." She patted her friend's knee. "We should get

some rest. Would you like an escort back to your quarters?"

"I'll be fine," Satsuki said. "Nonon… thank you."

When she was alone in the spacious music hall, she lowered her eyes again to her flute. If it were held even with her elbow, it would reach just past her fingertips; its body was patterned with black, and dotted with seven holes. The *ryuuteki*… a customary choice of instrument, for the Kiryuuin line.

But for the princess, it carried what few memories remained of happier days - memories now marred with bitterness, but precious all the same.

Things are crazy, indeed… She peered at a mosaic of cloud and stars, through the skylight above. *But I will not fail… Father.*

When the flute returned to her lips, she forgot about precise notes and timing, and gave herself over to memory in their stead. So she settled comfortably into a melody from her youth.

Muddling was like hypnosis - a suggestion to overlook something amiss, to walk a certain path, to relax when one ought be quite alert.

At this moment, Ryuu knew she was being Muddled not by catching any flaws in her surroundings, nor by the itch that was all but unnoticeable before she realized what was occurring; what tipped her off was her own behavior of walking through a doorway, and proceeding down the center of a great hall. The space was empty, comfortably dark if lined with starlit windows high on the walls, but the realization that she had neglected to slip to the walls and deeper shadows was jarring.

The fact that she couldn't catch any flaws in her perception, even once aware of it, meant that the spell had been woven with expert finesse. She didn't immediately amend her mistake, but moved just a bit more slowly down the hall. Internally she swore; she hadn't even

noted the walkways that lined the hall a floor above. But the palace wouldn't be expecting an intruder, and in the event that some mage *was* actively Muddling her, potential observers would act more quickly if she gave away that she'd caught on.

She dipped two fingers casually in a small pocket on her belt as she walked, and lifted them by her ear.

She gave a quick snap of dusty fingers. The powder was enchanted - laced with Lucid. It popped softly to life on the sound produced, clearing her head.

Her blood went cold as she sensed the eyes on her. She took another step, and another, face forward, while a multitude of faces peered from the darkness in the corners of her eyes. And an itch lit across her scalp, from ear to ear, with the spell that swirled and built between the hands of a number of mages at her back, pushing her shadow out before her. The floor was stained pale by sun, a dark rectangular area marking where a rug had been no doubt recently removed.

Another step.

Where had she miscalculated? Why would so many be assembled here, prepared to blast her without a word? Was the castle guard this quick about its work?

Another. She breathed in through parted lips, in the near-silence.

-"*If you're detected, I want you out of there, hear? Even if you can't nab the sword, you get out.*"-

Forget the sword.

Fail the job.

Be outcast by the guild.

But she put those thoughts on hold, as a more distant memory came to mind.

-"*You might fight one-on-one,* maybe *on two in emergencies, but if we're fighting, things are bad. Thieves don't fight - we sneak, we run."-*

A beam of burning light crashed to the floor, striking like a cannon blast.

Ryuu was above the explosion and shower of debris. She turned elegantly in the air from an impossible leap, locking wide, cold eyes on the stunned mages who'd fired on her.

She made her choice.

Battlemages hate close range - and they hate even more when you're right on top of their allies.

Her feet sank smoothly to the arched ceiling, and she shoved away in a blur as a fusillade of smaller spells, arrows, and crossbow bolts converged with a roar behind her.

She landed on the walkway amid a group of crossbow wielders. Not scattered quite as effectively as they could've been: they hadn't expected her to wind up here, even if she'd survived the ambush spell. None of them would shoot at her in the middle of a tightly packed group.

A crucial moment is needed to change weapons.

That's plenty for me.

A guard's foot lashed out as he stowed his crossbow, fumbled for a dagger. She blocked and repelled the kick with her staff, and cracked the polearm across his helmet, sending him sprawling over the balustrade. The staff found another helmet, a throat, a ribcage, in stunning blows - knocked a sword from another hand - and she leapt

to the wall beside them, springing from it with enough force to drive three guards over the handrail as she caught them with a laterally-held staff. She sailed after them, hearing curses at her back from the other squads that had been closing in; the moment she bounded from the breastplate of the man she'd selected to break her fall, and sprinted up the hall, another volley of spells nipped at her heels.

A wall of soldiers flooded down stairways at the corners of the room, into her path. She leapt forward from well down the hall - spinning through the air, sailing ten meters, twenty, with no loss in altitude before her foot cracked into the upraised shield of a bewildered guard.

The man slowed as he crashed into a cushion of his fellows around him. Ryuu gave a furious roar, straightening her leg to blow him backwards - and sending a dozen soldiers scattering around him in a clatter of launched weapons and crashing mail, clearing her path through the doorway beyond.

Sprinting on, she jumped and spun with a flicker of intuition, her staff hacking a trio of arrows from the space at her back. She faced forward again by the time she landed, and lit off on her way with no break in stride as an alarm rang through the palace with a magical shriek, and hordes of her intended ambushers poured through the archway in pursuit.

The distant whine of an alarm cut through crisp flutesong, jarring. Her brow furrowed in annoyance only briefly, as she sat back in her chair.

The thief, then. Doubtless the guards would have attempted to ambush or trap her in some way; that the alarm was running meant she had evaded their initial attempt at capture after all, and would presently be well on her way to escape.

She would find the princess's quarters, nab the sword, and figure out what to do afterward then. She tried to ignore how loudly her heart was beating in her ears, as spells and projectiles hummed through the night air around her; she tried not to consider how turned around she might have been, as she tangled with the hodgepoge of maps in her head. She just needed to keep moving forward.

Spearmen were filing out of a turret stairway on the wall up ahead. She rolled under the first halberd's attack, diving into their ranks - she could breathe a moment among them, while the ranged ones wouldn't risk firing. The loose end of her sash, taken in hand, wrapped quickly around a dodged spear's shaft, and her free hand caught another; she spun, disarming the two weapons. A spear in one hand, her own staff in another, she parried moves from the three guards near enough to attack, and began to overwhelm them as she retaliated in a cracking flurry of staff work.

A glint in the corner of her eye. From a leap, her foot cracked into the buckling nose of a man who rushed forward - and she sprang, launching herself into the air and the man into the ground, clear of the path of an energy bolt that smashed into the side of the turret. She grimaced as the blast's intensity bowled the remaining guards off their feet.

Th-they… really want me…

Her hand met the turret wall, followed by her feet, as she continued to rise; in something of a gravity-defying cartwheel, she slipped up the wall and over the battlement masonry of the tower's edge. On landing on the terrace, she immediately began to run across.

She had led them on a hell of a chase; the vast bulk of the responding guards were collected behind her, pursuing from the way she'd come. Without question the soldiers would be storming the winding stairway that led up here, while the ranged ones would be concentrating their fire on the nearest walls, either fifteen meters below, in the event that she jumped.

But she didn't go for the adjacent walls below. Her teeth ground in scorn as the first guards rose from the staircase to the side, yelling for her to halt.

Watch me.

She crested the battlement, foot clapping over it with a wisp of dust, and leapt into the open air. Her eyes grew as she soared into the night, a thrill of exhilaration pulsing through her veins as wind rippled across her clothes, her eyes. Her teeth were bared. Her pursuers stared in awe.

At the apex of her leap, she was forty meters above the pavement of a courtyard - and despite the impressive distance traveled, nowhere near the opposite wall.

Her staff moved forward in both hands, tucked under her arm and angled toward the ground ahead.

"*TENKANTSUUJOU!* "

With this incantation the staff's end lanced down, crossing dozens of meters with terrific speed.

She was jolted as it struck the earth below, and caught fast. It slowed her descent and bent with her weight, curving as her momentum swung her forward - and catapulted her up again, as the extended staff snapped straight.

She sailed in an arc toward the top of the wall before her, staff retracting back to her with a hum as she did. It snapped to normal size, and she flipped acrobatically before landing, tumbling neatly once over the stones, and rising to her feet in another forward leap.

Her staff projected now to the intersection of the battlement and floor behind her, jolting her forward and up at breakneck speed.

Her lopsided smile couldn't have been wider. She wasn't sneaking, wasn't hiding, and still they couldn't stop her. She felt the power in her body; she felt, more than she had in years, irrepressibly alive.

You can't keep up with this! Look at me!

She was above a flat roof now; a broad glass skylight blurred by beneath her feet. Up ahead, she knew, was the wing where the princess ought to reside.

I ain't the type of thief you're used to-!

The itch flared across her ears, almost burned, as a cloud gathered and darkened in the sky well overhead. She snapped her head aside in shock, eyes locking onto a petite figure seated with a saccharine smile on another wall, fifty meters away.

Eyes shut in amusement, the almost childlike woman tipped a parasol her way.

BANG!

A column of power dropped like lightning from the clouds, solid, blinding, huge. Ryuu was engulfed.

Satsuki saw the light, heard the scream, an instant before *something* crashed through her skylight.

The figure fell at an angle, trailing smoke and shards of glass; her arms flailed out, and her wheezing mouth stretched agape in shock.

Eyes wide, Satsuki watched her fall even as she leapt back in reflex. The skylight glinted with skittering pinpricks of energy, shuddered - and disintegrated with a boom in the girl's wake.

Her back met the floor with a solid crunch. Satsuki stared at the stunned thief - her style of dress, and a singed cloth mask that hung below her chin, confirming as much - even as glass pattered briefly from the gauntlet she'd raised in defense, and soon settled in a layer of crystalline dust upon the music room floor. There was a moment of quiet before a bright red polearm clacked and skittered shortly, loudly to the ground across the room.

She's… so small. A child…?

No; a young woman, just on the cusp of adulthood, as Satsuki gauged it. A gasp creaked into the air, as the girl's prone form gave a shudder against the cracks she'd made in the floor. Strikingly blue eyes opened on Satsuki, holding her gaze for an uncertain number of moments. Then the thief's focus sank to the sword at her hip, with a start.

For one heartbeat, there was something wild, and terrifying, in the girl's eyes. But her look, her broken breath and her nose and mouth streaked with blood, were as pitiful as the raw shriek that rose from bloodstained lips as she reached out in her immobility, from several strides away. With such a worthless action, her wavering ferocity was spent.

"She fell - she's down there!"

"We got her! We got Ryuu!"

"Protect the princess!"

An Enforcer leapt from the now-open ceiling with one foot extended; in landing, he smashed his boot into the criminal's gut, so her body gave a thrash, and her throat a rough sound of outrage and pain. Guards rushed into the room, surrounding the girl with deadened eyes like hunting dogs on prey.

Satsuki observed dispassionately as the already rather incapacitated thief took a Stun spell at point blank, and was detained.

Cold - she kicked and twisted, and swore under her breath as the motion sent pain skittering through her form. She coughed, and icy water flecked from her face and hair; she blinked at the liquid splotches on simple, unfamiliar garb.

"Sleep well?" a man's voice asked. "I hope so. We have *much* to talk about, Ryuu."

She frowned at the portly Enforcer who'd spoken to her, on the other side of a grate of metal bars; a tall, younger man beside him held a bucket that dripped, the better part of its circumference wrapped in one massive hand. The walls around her were stone; the air was uncomfortably cool, musty, and wet. The floor hid beneath a layer of grime and dust. The cell was just long enough for her to lie down across, and went a tad deeper back.

"'Ryuu'…" He smiled scornfully, deepening the lines that framed a stubby mustache beneath his rounded nose. His uniform was like new, and he reeked of cologne; though he had the solid sort of build that could pack a lot of physical strength, by the rate of his breathing, she doubted he got much exercise on his job any longer. "What a ridiculous alias."

"It's all I've got, officer," she said indifferently, giving a shrug. The pain of her sudden movement had receded to a dull ache; her arms were sore, but probably from her sleeping on hands tied behind her back. With the shape she'd been in after her fall, she wondered how much time had passed-

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The deadline.

She'd already failed the job.

"That's where I think you're wrong, girl," the old guy was continuing. "Your body took unreasonably well to the healing of our Replenish mages, as I'm sure you're noticing. Once it was evident your life was

not in danger, we let the Detriment mages have their turn with you. And would you believe what they found?"

She radiated pointed disinterest.

"They couldn't Drain a single drop of magic from your body." He fixed her with a look. "An unregistered Augment mage of the caliber to do what you did on your little escapade would be one thing. But if you possess no identifiable brand of magic, this is a different matter *entirely* ."

"A Bloodborne power," she filled in with false enthusiasm, "immutable and insoluble in terms of the core ten magics of the realm's Grand Arcana. You got me."

"What is your *real* name, girl?"

"Ain't got one. No idea who my folks are," she easily lied. Or, half-lied. Damned if she knew much of anything about her mother. "I been on the streets as long as I can remember." Also false.

The man let out a sigh. "Do you know why you're here, girl?"

"You've got a lot of time on your hands?"

The wrinkles on his brow pressed inward. "As I said, we have a good deal to talk about. We'll see if your stay doesn't… loosen those lips a bit, yes?"

"'Fraid I ain't got much to *say*, to a noble or a lawman," she growled, head low, her tone rougher than it had often been since before Mikisugi took her in. "So I reckon yer fresh outta' luck, Oilylocks."

He smiled, staring back into her glowering eyes. "Soon you'll be singing like a *bird*, lass."

"I'm not the song and dance type of girl, lawman."

"AAAH! *S-son of a hussy-!!* "

She writhed in the constraints, wide eyes brimming with moisture beneath a knitted brow. Her lip curled in a snarl as she swore internally; she hadn't wanted to let them hear her scream. But when beatings had gotten them nowhere, they'd hung her by the wrists from the ceiling in the interrogation room, and-

Crack-!

Shit, that giant guy was dangerous with a whip!

The greasy guy - Kuroido, as she'd heard his subordinates call him - raised a hand for the attacker to pause. She fought to catch her breath, while lingering stars burned at the edges of her vision. A number of guards hung around the room, ranging from bored to uncomfortable with the spectacle; with the strength she'd showed off during her chase, a minimum of five were kept around at all times she was outside of her cell. She blinked on stinging sweat. From what she could tell, her shirt was glued to her back, soaked in blood.

"Well, girl?" came the patronizing voice. "Feeling any more talkative yet?"

"This seems like an inferior means of facilitating discourse," she said, putting out her best noblewoman's accent to accompany the mock-offense. They'd gotten nothing out of her, so far - not her true given name, much less her surname.

Kuroido held up three fingers. The Enforcer behind her put three more strikes on her already burning upper back; her teeth clenched, and her feet fought in vain to kick, bound in heavy shackles beneath her.

"Enough cheek. How about this, then - why were you after the princess's sword? To offer to the rebels, as a trophy? What is your affiliation with the rebel forces?"

"I don't even know what bloody rebels you're yappin' about! You expect me to know what my boss wanted the goddamned sword for?!"

"And who *is* your boss? What other miscreants are running your guild? Where are your operations headquartered? Give me names!"

She held her tongue as Takarada's golden sneer flashed through her mind.

The boss who'd sold her out, in all likelihood. Wanted her out of the way, probably hadn't so much wanted her surviving to wind up here. She wasn't a fool; putting two and two together hadn't taken long, once she'd had some quiet to herself on a cold night in the dungeon.

"What is it? Speak, girl. Go on."

But if the guild boss went under, Sensei and the others did, too. Takarada had probably been counting on that to hold her in check, in this scenario; but even if she could've hurt the boss without hurting anyone else, she realized, she would hold out just to spite this lawman.

She drew her head above aching shoulders, tilting it slightly as she sneered crookedly down at him, one eye narrow, one wide. "Info on my guild's about the *last* thing you can hope to get outta' me, pops."

"Then I hope you find *something* to fork over soon," he said, striding up to her. His cane cracked her in the ribs. "For your sake!"

Her sides were defenseless, the way she hung; he struck viciously, leaving her sweating in pain, and growling through clenched teeth, as tender muscle welted and bruised.

The cane jabbed up under her chin, forcing her to raise her head as her consciousness started to wane. "Look at you. Your bones should be broken, but they're not. Your wounds from yesterday have already

vanished. You're conscious though your back is in tatters. There's something wrong with you…"

Her breath shook. "You wanna' know what's *wrong* with me, yeah?"

His look was hopeful. It really was too easy.

She grinned. "I'm deep underground, chained up in a bloody dungeon, and you and your goons honestly ain't my type. That might be part of it-,"

She would consider it a won round, later, when she realized the cane to her skull had knocked her out.

"Thief."

She turned her head, from where she lay in her cell. "Giant guy," she answered bluntly.

The towering figure outside didn't face her. "You're not a rebel, are you?" It was barely a question; that said, she didn't answer. He lowered his head slightly, eyes hard. "I joined the Enforcers for a reason. I uphold the law in this city to protect people. What happens in these dungeons every day doesn't protect anyone, and I know that."

She turned her head away. He continued along on his watch shift, armor clanking lightly in time with heavy steps.

It had been so many days since she'd been given water, she instinctively began swallowing, then choking, when they dunked her head in the barrel. When they held her there, she struggled against the fingers gripping her hair and shirt as her lungs burned, nostrils burned, and her heart began to race; it was not logically, but again instinctively, that she began to panic. They yanked her up, and she was mid-breath when they shoved her down again; she yelled into

the filthy water, hands straining behind her back, causing rope to cut into her wrists. When this had repeated three times, she vomited in the water. She lost count of the number of times they continued, and lost track of whether she was breathing, drowning, swallowing, or puking, by the time they let her rest, holding her up for more than a few moments in the precious, biting cold air. The room spun languidly around her.

Kuroido's arms were crossed expectantly as he watched her wheeze and cough.

Her lip trembled. "Y-you… missed a spot."

He raised a brow, warning.

"I appreciate you h-helpin' me wash my face and all, but if you could get a little more behind the ears-,"

Her face broke the water with a clap.

"What is your name?!"

"Go sard yourself!"

One Spark user; one Replenisher trying to extend her endurance; one Lucid mage struggling to keep her conscious and her senses sharp. They were all running out of steam. Kuroido stood, dragging his stool forward and hefting it to break across her body and the wall behind her. The impact was shocking to her tingling flesh. Her mouth snapped open from a snarl.

"Hey, I'm mad too! 'Go sard yourself' is a lousy name, I tell ya'-!"

"Do you ever shut up?!"

"You're the one all desperate n' needy for conversation!"

He sent away the healer, and bade the others to continue.

"Hello."

However soft, the voice pierced the near-silence of the cell, the steady dripping of water on stone somewhere in the dungeon, and the rattle of Ryuu's breath in a parched throat. She twitched her eyes in the moderate darkness, toward the hooded figure standing outside the bars of her cramped holding.

"Gamagoori tells me of your… endeavor."

"… The huge guy?" Ryuu croaked, recalling the Enforcer who worked under Kuroido on some days.

The woman nodded, striking a match and lighting a candle as she lowered herself. Her posture was almost too perfect as she knelt outside the cell, withdrawing a flask from her cloak.

Suddenly attentive, Ryuu sat up on the stone floor with a bit more eagerness than she would have liked to let on. She could only see the woman's nose and mouth, beneath the shadows of the hood; they surrendered little, in terms of expression or intent.

"Water," she said simply, lifting the flask to let some liquid fall, visibly, from the vessel to her lips. Ryuu didn't realize when she'd closed her trembling hands on the bars, pressed her face up to them in the candlelight; her lips began to peel back from her teeth as the woman swallowed. For a moment, she feared the stranger simply intended to taunt her.

When the flask was then offered, she snatched it away and retreated a few meters, mindless. She opened it in suddenly, violently shaking hands, and steeled herself to neither drop it, spill it, nor choke. She drank it all, pace escalating as she did, and then suckled fruitlessly for a moment before she shook the last drops she could into her upturned mouth.

"You seem more… delicate, than the individual Gamagoori described stalwartly resisting torture for hours on end." She held out her hand, just outside the bars. Ryuu came forward and pressed the flask into it in a moment, and was halfway into her retreat when the visitor held out a trio of dinner rolls next.

She sprang to the bars again, nearly hitting her head as she swiped the bread from outstretched hands. Ryuu hadn't a prayer of denying that she was ravenous; she tore out a hunk of bread in her teeth, sniffing furiously, in belated skepticism, at the heart of the roll she was already gnashing up a piece of, and repeated with one of the rolls in her other hand, alternating to wolf down the two with dizzying speed before setting upon the third.

She hadn't retreated from the bars, this time. The visitor held out a hunk of cooked meat when she'd finished, and the look in the thief's rounding eyes bordered on adoration. The thief didn't actually seem to chew any of the three bites it took her to snap down the sizable chicken breast, a fact that would have been concerning, but she showed no signs of choking.

Ryuu waited a moment, catching her breath, and didn't speak until she observed that no more seemed to be forthcoming. "I-I'm-," she lost her words in a belch, and her cheeks reddened. She looked up, a mix of humiliated and appreciative. "… I'm not telling you anything, either, just so you know."

The visitor shook her head. "I haven't come to interrogate you. Not in that way, at least."

"That way…?"

"You sought the Princess's sword. When you were discovered, rather than escape, you tried to complete your task. The guards say you must be some manner of demon; that you fought like a tempest, and when you leapt, you soared freely through the air. Surely escaping should have been within your ability."

Ryuu fixed her gaze on the shadowy region where the visitor's eyes would be. "… One thing I learned about my line of work is that you can't always play to not lose. Sometimes, you gotta' play to win. Life's about the same, the way I see it."

One corner of the stranger's mouth gave the slightest twitch. "Life is no game. And look at the state you're in now. If *this* mission wasn't the one to cut your losses and play not to lose, what is?"

"This job was special," she maintained, looking away. "I *had* to win."

"And your guild cast you out, earnest naïveté and all, it seems. Yet you refuse to betray your fellows no matter how brutal the torment you undergo."

"The guild can be harsh, but so can the rest of the world. There are some things I owe it. All the years with them… I'd almost forgot what it was like, to be this hungry."

The woman considered her a moment, and stood. "I have a proposition for you. If you will serve under my command, I can protect you; you'll be freed from this dungeon, and you'll never go hungry again."

"Me? The thief who tried to steal your fancy sword?"

"I have influence…" Realizing Ryuu's wording, the princess flicked her hood back with a sigh. "I'll be blunt - I can make use of your talents. You're powerful, durable… and from what I can tell, you know how to keep a secret. I've reformed a bandit chief, and a con man before…"

"Ain't you quite the talent scout."

"If you'll serve me, I can easily pardon your crimes against the Crown."

Satsuki held out her hand in offer, confident and stern. The air around her seemed to grow energized, charged; the candlelight paled in insignificance, and the cell no longer felt cold. Ryuu blinked, but felt no telltale itch of Muddling. Still her heart thudded in her chest.

"So? Will you bind your life to a greater ambition, and see your abilities, wasted on a thief, come to fruition?"

"… Nah. No, I'm good."

"You're *what?* "

"You're messing with somethin' dangerous, aren't you, Princess?"

Satsuki was silent as she withdrew her hand.

Ryuu shook her head. "Nobles… kinda' rub me the wrong way. See, you're not bein' square with me right now. You give me some food and try to goad me into a hasty decision, and as impressive as you are about it…"

"I believe my offer is quite generous," Satsuki pointed out.

"You had your man to monitor it, but you waited to let the Enforcers whittle me down for a week before you approached me. You wouldn't bat an eye about using them, and my torture, to your own ends."

"If things go on as they have been," Satsuki said seriously, "they'll begin mutilating you, soon. Breaking bones, burning you with boiling oil. Thumbscrews, kneesplitters, flaying - does that better suit your tastes? You don't have much more time. They might even turn you over to be a test subject for the High Sorceress-,"

"You're not that much older than me, huh?" Ryuu remarked, squinting at her. "Your dress armor getup made me think you were older, back there under the skylight."

"Are you listening to me?"

Ryuu smiled softly. Was that a bit of concern, curiosity - or just a drive not to let someone useful go to waste? "Sorry, Princess. I've got my own secrets to guard, and they need to stay far away from the Crown."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed discerningly. "Do you plan to take those secrets to an early grave?" Yet somehow, however illogical, she had a sense of the answer.

"I'm not spending the rest of my life in this dungeon, Princess."

Their eyes held for several moments.

Satsuki was the next to speak. "Well-tempered here, yet so unyielding under duress…" She shut her eyes a moment. "They say a soul is shattered when it is forced to experience true powerlessness. Yet you do not lie broken."

Ryuu met the princess's scrutiny with a smile. "You're sharper than the others, Princess. Maybe I'll know such powerlessness someday, but it ain't once happened yet."

With a cold smile, a spark rekindling in her eye, Satsuki began to turn. "You may consider my interest piqued, Middle City Ryuu."

Before Ryuu could respond, her eyes locked onto the hand drifting into Satsuki's cloak.

"If you eat so suddenly after so long, you'll be ill. I hoped to give you time to digest," she said, pitching a pork steak through the bars.

Ryuu's hand snagged it in a blur, and in the same motion brought it on a course to her parting teeth. With a crunch of tearing meat, the conversation was over.

"Gamagoori-san… you're dismissed for the day."

"Sir…?" But after a moment of confusion the man remembered himself, and saluted to Kuroido. Ryuu noted the flicker of his eyes her way before the young Enforcer turned to leave the chamber without further question.

Gamagoori Ira… is one of the princess's. Whatever that means… Ryuu mulled, though her mind was hazy, her face taut in pain.

Kuroido watched the man go. Then he strode up to the firepit, plucking the branding iron from it and ramming it below Ryuu's collarbone. She withheld a cry as she shuddered, pinning her head back against the wall behind her as the hot metal singed her flesh. And she held Kuroido's eyes as the Enforcer pressed with all his strength. Her nostrils flared, and she showed her teeth.

Scowling, he tossed the brand - its marking, the royal crest - into the fire again. But his scowl wasn't like it had been before; it was as if he knew at this point that he wasn't getting Ryuu to talk, no matter how many burns or bruises they subjected her to. She had realized at some point that he would have been happy with anything, even inaccurate information, so long as he got something incriminating to show for his efforts; if she would just cry that she was in league with rebels, or sell out some guild members, he could pretend the torture had been effective and worthwhile, and claim victory on her case.

Her nose wrinkled at the smell of burnt flesh, as the chief of Enforcers turned to four more of his subordinates in the room. He spoke briefly to them, and left. Three of the subordinates came and unchained Ryuu from the wall, taking her back to her cell.

Unusually, they chained her against the far wall so that her hands, still tight behind her, were secured just above the ground, forcing her to kneel. They put a shackle on her ankles, and bolted it to a restraint at the floor, so that her feet couldn't move. They left without a word, locking her cell door behind them.

Oh, so instead of letting her sprawl freely on the floor of her cramped cell, they'd leave her in this uncomfortable crouch all night. She

wiggled a bit, testing; she couldn't turn around or lie down. Fantastic.

She sighed, looking at the sore mark above her breast. They'd been burning her with fire pokers for at least a half hour, she figured; her back was one large ache of burns. What she had learned about Gamagoori was that he was fair in his harshness, if there was such a thing; he avoided dangerous areas where serious damage could be inflicted, and he was deliberate in his moves, measured in the strength he applied. Whether his boss noticed or not, he wasn't trying to destroy. She certainly couldn't picture the straight-backed giant hefting a hot iron toward her with such a sloppy motion, where he could easily slip and strike her breast, neck, or face.

Well, it was what it was, she thought, cringing at the sight of the insignia dark and inflamed on her collarbone.

She looked up at the sound of footsteps in the hall. The fourth goon from before, who had split off from the ones who'd brought her to her cell, unlocked the door.

"There a problem?" she growled as he approached. With a somber look, not keen on meeting her eyes, he grabbed her hair, and jabbed a needle in her neck. She yelped in surprise, cursing as he pulled the syringe away and strode quickly from her cell. She heard his steps receding, fading into nothing.

What the…? She felt an unpleasant itch; whatever he'd shot her up with was laced with Detriment and Muddle, in debilitating doses. Finding it very difficult to sit straight, she slumped as her muscles weakened and relaxed, and soon the chains mostly supported her.

She shook her head rapidly, lifting it with a tremendous effort as her cell opened again. Her lip curled at the sight of Kuroido.

"Great," she said, finding her words slurred, badly. "To what honor do I owe this-?"

She couldn't even brace for the heavy hand that swatted across her face; her reflexes were dull. And by the time she realized what was happening, he'd ripped her shirt open.

Her eyes bulged. "No, wait-!"

It was easy for him to kick her hard in the gut, the way she knelt. He took a fistful of her hair and knocked her head against the wall, squeezing with thick fingers.

"You consider yourself quite clever, don't you? So shrewd, so strong. For months you waste my time and tarnish my name; and now, you jeer and spit in my face. You, a fool whelp who chose a name as formidable as *Ryuu*, the name of great and powerful legendary beasts, as if simply to spite your queen's Crown!"

His hand had helped itself to her chest, groping and squeezing painfully before rising to dig his thumb into the fresh brand. She cried out, thrashing in protest but weak with the concoction that weighed on her mind and her limbs.

"There's a rumor that says your true name is naught but a stone's throw from your alias - I asked you about this in one of our *sessions*, yes? But it's also said your true name isn't even written with the same characters!" he scoffed, spitting as he spoke. "What a sad little fraud! Did you think you were witty, in your impudence?!"

"Please, please don't!"

"Silence! I plan to enjoy this," he said, fervor in his eyes. He ran his tongue over his lips as he cupped her groin in his hand, pressing through her pants; he watched her squirm in discomfort, watched her face blanch, with a gloating smile on his lips. "Scum that would slight my Queen deserves what it gets!"

"S-stop! I'm warning you right now-!"

His knee caught her harshly in the crotch, causing her to sputter in pain. "You, warning me? You should learn to respect the position you're in!" he laughed, discarding his belt and beginning to disrobe. She grimaced, shaking her head sluggishly, pinning herself to the wall as he tore her threadbare prisoner's pants away. "Don't worry! A common-blooded wench's filthy cunt isn't even worthy of my flesh!"

His hand in her hair forced her head low, right in front of him. Tears spilled, rolled down her cheeks.

"But after that rotten mouth of yours has been cleansed to my liking, perhaps my cane shall ravage your womanhood until you're screaming, begging to speak!"

"Please, no! No!!"

Mikisugi was right, of course - a proper little show of fear went a long way.

Satsuki struggled to keep a straight face as Houka delivered the report. "… She did *what*, now?"

"She…" The usually stoic mage cleared his throat in discomfort, for the news as well as the likely, and unsettling, circumstances surrounding it. "She bit it *off* ."

At the sound of a snigger, Satsuki shot Sanageyama a look, silencing him. She turned back to Houka, revulsion in her eyes. "The Chief of Enforcers attempted to…?"

He nodded. "It will never be officially acknowledged, but really, the evidence is damning. The guard found him screaming, covered in blood on the ground outside her open cell, crying that it happened in a flash, that she's a monster, her teeth unnaturally sharp. He babbled about a faulty drug, about how her jaw shouldn't have had the strength.

"The… thief was laughing rather raucously the entire time, chained to the wall, garb in tatters… mouth and clothes also covered in blood. Just… b-blood, everywhere, apparently. The better part of Kuroido's…" He became extremely mindful, even more so than usual, of the fact that he spoke to a princess. "*It* lay mangled on the floor near her. They rushed him to the healers to cauterize the wound; he's lucky to be alive. Just… lots of blood."

"… Pfft… Our little master thief has pulled off quite the heist-,"

"SANAGEYAMA!!" Gamagoori screeched, before Satsuki could berate him. "This is no laughing matter! That a fellow man of the law could be capable of such… Ghhhhrrr!" He drove a furious breath through grinding teeth, slamming his fist on a table to shake the room. "I should have KNOWN something was awry!!"

"At least he got what's coming to him," Jakuzure remarked, shaking her head. "More importantly for now…" She looked to Satsuki, uncertain.

"She's maimed a noble, and a top-ranking official of the high imperial court, at that," Satsuki said, confirming her fears. "An act punishable by death." She frowned at her choice of wording; any crime, or action for that matter, could in fact be punishable by whatever the queen deemed fit.

"W-wait, back up!" Sanageyama stuttered, for once shocked. "I-I mean - pardon me, m'lady, but considering what he was attempting…?"

"The court will never officially acknowledge or investigate the details of the incident - that the Chief of Enforcers sought to forcibly indulge in shameful acts with a commoner - nor will it acknowledge an act of self-defense by said commoner, a known thief and criminal, against a noble." She rubbed her temples. "That's how it will be spun; Kuroido will almost certainly be discharged, but he will be charged with no crime. Our little thief is in a bind, and it's unlikely even *my* pardon could wrest her from it any longer."

A short time later, Satsuki was striding from the meeting, cutting through a gravelly yard when she halted to see a prisoner being relocated.

The state of said prisoner was what caught her in her tracks. Even from dozens of meters away, as she was, she could immediately see the countless welts, cuts, and flog marks covering a bare, blood-streaked body being dragged limply by the arms between two guards. Her head hung, and a rag across her mouth was tied behind her head, as a gag. One eye was swollen shut, the other also hosting a wicked shiner but still just able to crack open; her hair was matted, her face crossed by jagged patterns of dribbling blood. A small group of guards trailed the ones who towed her up the path, weapons at the ready, as if she didn't hang all but lifeless as it was.

The princess picked up on an uneven, rattling wheeze of shallow breaths as the escort neared, and the guards stopped before her to bow in acknowledgment.

"What has brought on such severe measures against this prisoner?" she inquired, displaying only curiosity and indifference for the soldiers' eyes, and a dash of repugnance as she glanced toward the savagely beaten girl at their feet.

"This common wench heinously tricked and maimed Master Kuroido. The queen ordered her beating as a preliminary punishment prior to her relocation; she's now off to the holdings for those awaiting execution."

Satsuki looked appalled. "This wispy thing mutilated the Chief of Enforcers? How, exactly?"

"The details of the incident are as of yet unknown, Satsuki-hime."

"I see; how terrifying. Carry on, then," she said.

As they continued along the path, she might have seen a smirk tick up the corner of the thief's busted lips.

Madwoman, Satsuki thought as she continued to walk.

-"Satsuki-hime? There is a bit more that might be of interest. The guard who discovered the commotion says the thief was shouting something odd, as she laughed."

"What was it then, Inumuta?"

" 'You think I'm the prey.'"-

Satsuki's teeth clenched. *Madness.*

You simply had to tempt the eye of the Queen, didn't you?

Night came over the castle quietly. A guard patrolling the grounds, idly using a spear like a walking stick, yawned and scratched under the edge of his helmet.

He froze, as if a chill had come over him; he looked up toward the wall. After a disgruntled moment, he glanced around and continued on his route.

On the wall behind him, the small, dark figure of a crouched being loomed.

"Princess," came a light croak from behind the steel door, before Satsuki uttered a word.

"Shush," she answered. "What if someone heard you?"

"You're not dim enough to be dawdling outside my cell with someone close enough to hear us."

Satsuki raised an annoyed brow, and did not correct her. The window at the foot of the door was large enough to admit sound, food, and little else. "Are your hands free?"

"Yup-,"

She dropped a roll, bouncing it off a light kick through the opening. The sounds of Ryuu making short work of it ensued. "I couldn't smuggle much, this time," she said, kneeling to pass a flask through the window.

It returned to her, empty, before a "No worries" came in reply.

Satsuki's eyes hardened. "What manner of imbecile are you, thief?"

"I don't understand the question, Princess."

"You're on death row."

"Oh, you're not talkin' about what happened with ol' Hairgrease?" A snicker. "Can't say I was all that fond of playin' along with the alternative. You know the gritty details, I take it? You strike me as a woman who makes a point of knowing things."

"So you resisted," Satsuki said slowly, as if to make clear the weight of each word, "even aware *resistance* meant your own *death* . I misread you, it seems; you're yet another insignificant person after all."

"What's that now?"

"A person possessing true ambition, or a reason to live, would have exercised restraint. But you acted as might the small-minded masses. So you struck a blow at your tormentor? You might have even protected a few other prisoners from abuse at his hands, and that's fine and well. But on such a small scale, you've done nothing to the corruption that festers in this kingdom's ranks. In the grand scheme of fate, what can you accomplish now?"

"You don't know me, Princess."

"I know enough about your situation."

"And what if something you *don't* know about me could change *everything* about this situation?"

There was silence between them; both stared at the vault-like door, in the direction of the other.

A bluff? Satsuki wondered. *But what does she stand to gain by it?*

"That sound…"

At the words, Satsuki realized she had begun to tap her fingertips on the side of her flute. She held it in hand, rather than risk it getting scraped or dusty in a pocket of her cloak. "A flute. A *ryuuteki* . I had a lesson a short while ago."

"Ryuu-teki? Seems like my kind of instrument."

"That was pathetic, thief."

It was a tentative moment before Ryuu spoke again. "Is… is anyone, y'know… around? Or, I mean, how much time can you be here?"

Satsuki regarded the curious voice. This, from a woman whose beheading would be carried out the morning after the next. Just a girl, really. There was nothing for Satsuki to gain from her.

She couldn't explain, then, why she sat back against the wall, and held the flute to her lips.

But she paused. Her mind mulled over the proper pieces she'd practiced earlier, sleek and precise. Would it make any difference to her present audience?

She took a breath, and let out the comfortable melody from her youth.

Ryuu was silent, on the other side of the door, her eyes unblinking for several moments at the sound that poured into the air. Her eyes shut, and she found herself nodding her head very slowly.

A smile curled over her lips as she folded her hands in her lap, relaxing her aching body against the door to listen.

Satsuki felt a small, new thrill as she rolled from note to note; she had never played this song in the company of another. But somehow, sharing her most treasured melody with the condemned thief didn't feel improper, or crudely intimate, as it tended to whenever she had considered sharing it in the past.

Ryuu was still for several breaths after the last note faded. She shivered, but not in an unpleasant way.

"Well?" That was Satsuki, outside. Right. The kingdom's princess, heir to the throne.

"It… was nice." Ryuu paused; it was such an understatement, it felt criminal - and she of all people knew 'criminal.' She looked at the ceiling of her cell, biting her lip. Well. In a few days, she'd never see or hear the princess again, right? "… It made my chest feel… warm, somehow."

"… I see."

Ryuu sniggered at the short response. "Is that song precious to you?" *Piss. What the hell are you blathering, to the princess of the land?*

"It is," Satsuki admitted, surprising her. "It's a memento from my father." She paused a long moment. "I… wish I could have played it for my baby sister, at least once."

Ryuu was quiet. She'd never heard of the queen having another daughter, so she inferred easily enough that said sister had not lived long. "I'm sorry, princess. I truly am. It was, just… such a lovely

sound. A lovely bunch of sounds. There's no doubt in my mind she would've loved it."

Satsuki smirked, shaking her head. *The Second Princess would have been about your age, wouldn't she? Foolish…* she berated herself. Now was much too soon to let herself stop and indulge in sentimentality. Her father and sister could smile from the After, once she'd completed her task.

"My old man used to play for me, too," Ryuu said, trying to lighten the silence. "He had a rickety old lute." The distant memory of a house deep in the woods, and her father's workshop, surfaced in a fuzzy corner of her mind. She grimaced good-naturedly. "I ain't played one in ages; I'm sure I'd sound like rubbish, compared to that."

"You should play it," Satsuki said, surprising her. "Tomorrow night - I'll bring you a *biwa* ."

Ryuu blinked. Well, the princess *had* already shared her song with her… "Guess there's no arguing it, huh? A princess demands to hear me play, so who'm I to turn down the honor of her audience - is that it? You're *pushy*, Kiryuuin."

"As expected of a royal?"

Ryuu heard her humor, and her own face held a smile of appreciation.

A shadow skulked along the castle wall. It paused momentarily, silent, practically invisible, and took in the conversation of guards passing on the wall above. Old information, already gathered and filed away: the execution was set for noon tomorrow, in the Square that united middle and upper city. Indeed, that information was the cause of the silent infiltrator's presence.

The figure continued on through the cover of darkness. Preparations were nearly complete.

"Did they beat you today?"

"No one's been in, the whole repentance period. Though I doubt they'd be the happiest to know my isolation's being breached…"

Ryuu held the biwa carefully in her hands. The princess had said it was an old spare when she'd handed it to her, one not used in some time, but it had a far more elegant make than the instrument Ryuu's father had first guided in her short, chubby fingers so long ago.

Get a grip, Ryuu. You've handled way more valuable things than this… Positioning the lute properly against herself, she held the flat, triangular plectrum by its handle, and used it to take a light, experimental strum. She paused self-consciously, ironically grateful for the inches of steel between her and her visitor's ice blue eyes.

She should have bigger things on her mind - how time was running short, for one thing. How if they didn't come soon, she'd be marching off to the execution grounds tomorrow. How if it really came down to it, she'd have to do something she'd very much rather not do…

"Is it satisfactory?"

"It's just peachy," she answered, quick. She wrestled down her nerves. She really hadn't played her father's biwa in a long time; it sat on a shelf in her room in middle city, gathering dust with her bitterness. However she hated to admit it, it felt suddenly childish; if she were to die tomorrow, or if she'd managed to get herself knocked off on one of her jobs up to now, it would've been… such a waste, really. She bit her lip.

"Are you well?"

She started the song, intent not to dwell on another word.

She stumbled in places, going on memory and ear; she felt pressure behind her eyes, as the nostalgia burned her throat. But gradually she calmed, and let the tune carry her hands, nipping the strings with the plectrum and coaxing the pitch with her fingers.

When she finished, she began to repeat it without pause. *Stupid old man. Stupid old man and your stupid songs…*

And she repeated it again, intent on patching up the missed notes, the falters.

When she began to play it a fourth time, flutesong joined her tune.

It was Satsuki's father's song from yesterday. It was the same as it had been, as soothing as it had been, and yet Ryuu now marveled in bemused surprise at why it had felt so right, so familiar but so not.

Their fathers' tunes complemented each other marvelously.

Ryuu blinked, utterly still as the songs ended together. She couldn't focus just yet on the enigmatic coincidence, or fancy to conjure any strange twists of fate that might have led her and the kingdom's princess to intertwine two precious and distinctive melodies so miraculously into one. She waited, basking in a moment of impossible and deeply suffusing peace, while her mind wanted to race.

Satsuki opened her mouth. "Your song-,"

The dungeon rattled with a distant boom.

The princess stood immediately - and nearly stumbled, as another explosion, and another, shook through the earth around them. Pebbles and dust sifted down from the ceiling; the magic rattle of the alarm blared from far above. The castle - the blasts couldn't have been far. The castle was under attack-?

She turned her head at a much closer, still more concerning sound - a bang of impact, breaking bolts, groaning metal - and narrowly dodged the vault-like door of Ryuu's cell as it cracked into the opposite wall.

… *What?*

Her eyes were on the displaced door - skirting over a warped sliding lock, and the scraped, roughly horizontal indentation impressed upon the buckled steel surface - when a hand grasped her arm, twisting it behind her. A bare foot took the back of her knee; when she dropped, her sword had been liberated from her belt, and the thief was bolting down the hall.

Satsuki reached into her cloak for the first thing she could reach, and hurled a chicken leg with formidable velocity for the back of Ryuu's retreating mane of blue. Sensing a projectile, Ryuu turned-

Her nose twitched-

And she wouldn't be proud to say that her reaction was to open her mouth, and catch the speeding delectable whole.

Her teeth locked on bone as the drumstick jabbed the back of her throat, knocking her eyebrows inward. The princess's surprisingly solid fist in her gut threw a neatly stripped bone from her lips with a bark.

Ryuu staggered back, dragging the sheathed sword low on the ground as she swallowed with great effort, coughed, and gathered her breath, wide eyes sizing Satsuki up.

"I don't want to fight you, Ryuu."

"Great. I'll just be on my way-,"

"You are *not* leaving here with my sword." Her tone left no potential for negotiation.

Ryuu bared her teeth in a crooked grin. "Listen, Princess. I don't relish the idea of hurting you - and you bein' a royal, *believe* me, that says a lot. And sure I ain't in top form just now, but if you try to stop me- Shit!"

Powder dust shot from Satsuki's gloved hand, in a bursting wave of cold. Ryuu held up the scabbard, and one arm, in defense, but when Satsuki rushed her, she found that the Frost magic had slicked over much of the ground at her feet; Ryuu caught herself as she started to slip, but Satsuki's hand closed on the Bakuzan's hilt, withdrawing the obsidian longsword from its silver-white sheath as they separated.

They held eyes for a moment, stances low.

Ryuu sprang, swinging the scabbard for her head with a yell. Satsuki blocked high, and threw a kick for the wiry thief's stomach; Ryuu spun around to dodge, sweeping the scabbard in another strike. The two clashed rapidly, Ryuu wielding the scabbard haphazardly as she might a short staff; the princess handled the sacred zweihänder Bakuzan with baffling speed for its size, forcing the smaller girl back with a flurry of blade work.

The thief ducked to dodge, and Satsuki recoiled as fine adamantine sparked and rebounded against the stone of the wall. The scabbard cracked over her hands, sending her blade down the hall behind her. Satsuki evaded the next swing, grabbing the scabbard and twisting skillfully to fling Ryuu over herself; the thief relinquished her makeshift weapon in favor of landing on her feet, and hopping back.

"You're stronger than I anticipated," Satsuki observed, casting the scabbard aside.

"Same to you," Ryuu conceded with a sneer of annoyance. "It'd be a lot more convenient if you weren't."

"You can still run, you know."

Ryuu snarled, and threw a heel palm strike - and the princess's form blurred for one moment, darting to the side. Ryuu's eyes grew as she struck through the afterimage; Satsuki's heels slid back as she seemed to materialize behind her.

A white-gloved fist was held low, clenched sharply. "Apologies. It *is* ironic… to use this to fell someone called Ryuu," she noted, as her fist began to blaze red.

Ryuu turned, watching in astonishment as the air grew bright, and power shone from the princess's eyes. Satsuki's cloak was flung out behind her, baring her armor and the crest upon her breastplate as she wound back a punch, and stepped forward.

"*RYUU NO YOUSOU!* " she proclaimed, and a beastly spectre flashed at her back as she smashed her fist dead into Ryuu's oncoming swing of retaliation.

[ASPECT OF THE DRAGON]

A scalding roar reverberated in Ryuu's skull, as the air writhed and distorted around them. Then the combatants were blown apart.

Satsuki's stern eyes were incredulous as she caught her balance, stepping back. She watched the girl across from her shake out smoking knuckles and give a hiss of pain as she did. *This…* thief*, repelled the Kiryuuin's sacred aspect?!*

Noting where she stood, she lunged forward and to the side, grabbing the disarmed Bakuzan to move without warning into a lateral swing.

Ryuu bent her knees, and was *gone* .

The tap of bare feet meeting the ceiling drew Satsuki's gaze a moment before her foe shot down in a whirlwind-like move, sinking a

spinning heel kick into the upraised forearm guarding Satsuki's head.

The impact echoed on the hallway's stone for a breath and a half. Satsuki began to buckle - and was bowled backwards off her feet, swatted to the floor and sent rolling rapidly back.

Teeth clenching, she got her feet under her and rose, only for her back to slam into the wall at the end of the path. Slightly winded, she focused on the adversary sprinting toward her. *In that case…*

She knew she shouldn't, but she did.

Her fist was enshrouded in a blaze of light as she ducked in a crouch, letting Ryuu's punch crack into the wall. She opened searing white eyes with a crack of activated power as she raised her fists and moved for the exposed body of her foe.

"*TORA NO YOUSOU!* "

Ryuu seemed to move in slow motion, with respect to every detail from the lingering, bodily momentum of her charge to the flinch that began as her fist dully crackled the wall. Even with this, Satsuki's left fist was a blur of jabs that thudded across Ryuu's abdomen, each solid blow, while not budging her in the least, sending a ripple through her loose prison shirt - before Satsuki's glowing right fist closed in with a roar of speed, of burning air, to lodge itself in the solar plexus.

[ASPECT OF THE TIGER]

The spell broke an instant after the final strike, and Ryuu's mouth stretched wide as she was launched straight down the hall, her body cracking spread-eagle into the stone twenty meters away.

Panting for breath, Satsuki lowered her fist. She strode toward Ryuu as the girl toppled to her knees and then awkwardly onto her face,

one arm braced across her middle as she wheezed and huffed in shock.

"It seems you pushed your luck," Satsuki said, stopping before her.

Ryuu's fingers scraped over the floor.

A blur - Satsuki could only glimpse Ryuu rising, turning *away* from her in a whirling leap, before a tremendous weight walloped across Satsuki's middle, sending her spinning into the wall.

She'd begun to glance off of it, to collapse, when a strong hand locked on her wrist, and her front was shoved firmly up against the stone.

Ryuu's breathing was labored behind her. "You're impressive alright, Princess…"

Satsuki thrashed - to no avail. She found in bewilderment that she was effectively immobile as Ryuu held her, her strength like a child's to the abnormal power of the smaller woman pinning her.

A chill fluttered through her as the thief chuckled, breath cool on Satsuki's neck. Her voice was low, almost alien. "You pride yourself on being the cool, rational type, yeah? You can predict anything within the realm of reason… usually. But against someone like me, you're fresh outta' luck. I am the *death* of common sense, girl - bane to your precious world of order and reason, cause and effect."

"You're much too strong for your size - you *are* a monster, aren't you? A werewolf, or an oni - or a bloodthirster-," She bit back the quaver in her voice as Ryuu laughed, a rough sound.

"If only…"

Satsuki had no time to consider this before Ryuu spun her around, gripped her face across the mouth, and pulled her in just enough to ram the back of her skull into the stone again.

Ryuu watched the Kiryuuin's eyes bob back, and released her. The Princess slumped to the floor as the thief turned, grabbing the discarded scabbard and then the sword. She gave the Kiryuuin one more look, and made for the stairway with the weapon tucked under her arm. Ryuu figured she would be fine; hopefully she hadn't hit her hard enough to cause serious damage.

"Farewell, Princess," she muttered, raising a hand in a quick mock-salute. *It was a good fight…*

For now, she'd already made her friend wait long enough.

"Hime? Satsuki-hime!"

"Gama… goori?"

"M'lady, are you well?! What's happened here?!"

Satsuki blinked at the concerned face above her - and sat up quickly. "The armory!"

"P-pardon?"

The alarms still rang above; little time had passed. Her eyes now bored into the floor, flickering as she retraced the path of thoughts that had raced even in her dazed state, solving a puzzle around the new tidbit of information Ryuu had relinquished.

The power to escape from her cell at will. The only thing keeping her, then, was an inability to escape without tripping the alarm - the risk of recapture, or worse, should she draw the fire of a large number of guards and mages again. But a quick escape should have been easy. She had another objective, and surely it wasn't only Satsuki's Bakuzan - a useful trophy, but hardly crucial in circumstances demanding escape, for a job she'd technically already failed.

Satsuki looked up as another explosion rumbled somewhere in the distance.

And with allies wreaking havoc on the castle grounds, she can move far more freely.

"Ryuu wielded a staff when she infiltrated, correct? A weapon with a peculiar enchantment. It was left in the armory when our mages could make nothing of it."

"She would be mad to wager her freedom for such a thing," Gamagoori said, moving to let the princess pass as she rose to stride on at a fast clip. He jogged to catch up, the weight of one great shield on his arm and another on his back handled with deceptive ease as he kept pace behind her. "Would she really go after some weapon at a time like this?"

Satsuki smiled coldly. "I'm going after mine."

A chainmail vest, breeches barely finer than her prison ones, and a standard helm - the uniform wasn't a superb fit, but she didn't have time to look for better. Now, rather than darting from shadow to shadow as groups of soldiers thundered by, she could duck a lot more quickly through the chaos outside. She would make for the outer wall at a normal soldier's pace - not near an entrance, but a backway, to cut the potential for pursuit. When she was close enough she could easily blow her cover with however outrageous a leap was required.

Pushing open the armory door, she only hoped no one would be quick to notice the royal blade - far too grandiose to be a common soldier's, or even a knight's - at her belt, or the crimson Tenkantsuujou in her hand.

She was forty meters from the armory when someone did just that.

Skidding to a halt in the gravel and jumping back, she barely dodged the glistening gust of icy wind that bounded across her path. Her tongue clicked as she saw the princess racing toward her, Gamagoori at her back.

"Ryuu! Return my blade!"

"No can do, Princess!" Landing, she rolled back, spun - and sent the Tenkantsuujou's end shooting toward Satsuki's skull, the pole lancing out twenty meters in the blink of an eye.

THAM!

The princess glowered calmly from behind Gamagoori, whose sturdy, rectangular shield had taken the strike without incident. The giant lowered his head, eyes hidden.

"You did *not*…"

His feet shifted, as he lifted the second shield from his back; its lower edge thudded heavily down, and a line of steely spikes scraped back through gravel along the ground.

"… make a *strike* at Satsuki-hime…"

Ryuu's eyes grew as he leapt for her with enormous strength, shaking the earth with his departure; the grand shield was hefted effortlessly back on his arm, and driven forward to head his charge as a bludgeon. His face was twisted in outrage.

"… RIGHT IN FRONT OF *ME!!* " he boomed, smashing the shield to the earth.

An Augment mage! Ryuu thought, sailing back from her leap of evasion as the ground shattered under the blow. Glowing cracks raced outward across lurching masses of earth, forward from him in a cone - and exploded in a blast of Rend, flinging Ryuu amid a shower of debris.

She swore, rolling to her feet and bolting the other way. "I ain't got time to play with you!"

The sound that screeched into the air shook her to the soul. It was the type of commanding, vicious crescendo of notes she could picture hearing in a play, right before a hero died a violent death.

And at the terror that went rattling down her spine, she faltered, dropping to one knee. Muddling - it wasn't supposed to *work* like this - it wasn't supposed to be blatant, powerful enough to drive your heart into your gut and twist them together even after you were aware of it. But the sound was petrifying. Her eyes found the diminutive figure of a smiling young noblewoman with a stringed instrument in her hand, propped on one shoulder; the pink-haired sorceress's look was wickedly amused as she drew a bow artfully to and fro across the strings, rapid, effortless in the way she crushed her target.

"Are you enjoying my song? But I'm afraid this tune has barbs!" she yelled, and with one long stroke of the bow, a quick variation injected into the continuing song, spots in the air brightened at her back. A number of quick strokes followed, each sending a bolt of power lancing toward Ryuu.

Weaving battlemagics without interrupting her Muddle? Ryuu scowled, willed the close end of the Tenkantsuujou to jut painfully into the side of her ribs, and dived to safety as the blasts snapped into the ground behind her. But a quick shock was no substitute for even a pinch of Lucid; it was why the powdered stuff was so damned expensive. Her stance was already shaky again.

"We're retrieving the Bakuzan, are we not?" a new voice asked, cool and smart, as a slender mage stepped up across from her. He held up a hand, as ghostly blue energy pooled about his feet, swirling upward and branching into distinct masses of distorting air as it rose around him. Neat blue hair danced along with his cloak, and he adjusted a pair of spectacles before flicking his hand toward Ryuu.

"Fetch," he ordered, and two ethereal wolves sprang to form, emerging fluidly from the luminous haze to barrel Ryuu's way with fangs bared.

She swung the Tenkantsuujou around, flinging her weight against it to lodge one end forward into the earth - and its opposite sprang back, punching the instrument from the yelping songstress's hands behind her. The tune cut out just as one of the summoned beasts was seizing the Bakuzan's scabbard at her belt, growling as it did; she cracked her returning staff surely across its skull, and used it then to catch the other's lunging fangs, as she delivered a kick to its chest. The two melted into spectral smoke, dissipating as they sailed away, and Ryuu stood straight with a scowl. She needed to take out at least one of these mages before they could spin any more spells her way-

"*En garde!* "

She leaned aside, narrowly avoiding the sword of a knight who sailed down from above. He cut past her, smirking as he slid back in a crouch - to stop before the waiting Gamagoori, whose large hand gave him a clap on the shoulder.

The wild-haired man's grin widened, and he blurred with the essence of Swift as he lunged for Ryuu again. Sword and staff met six ringing times in the space of an instant, and Ryuu began to be driven off-balance by his speed. The knight drew back and poised himself to strike, eyes glinting intensely in focus as he did.

He moved, slightly curved sword swinging around, and Ryuu froze as she perceived three blades - for her head, wrist, and stomach - closing simultaneously for their marks.

She twisted awkwardly, dodging the lunge for her gut as wounds split across her shoulder and forearm, and she leapt away. But the others had spread to surround her.

She panted for breath, eyeing them in turn. "You're a persistent bunch, ain't you?!"

"Our lady's concerns are our concerns," the knight said, smirking. "Her foes are our foes!"

"You might be skillful, thief," the summoner remarked.

"But against all of us, you're not much," the songstress said, her instrument at the ready once more.

Gamagoori braced a shield on either arm, stance low, face wrought in a ferocious snarl. "We are Satsuki-hime's unbreakable Circle - and as long as we stand together with her, no adversary of hers shall fail to crumble before us!"

"Well, Ryuu?" the princess said. "Will you kindly return my sword, or will you have us take it by force? You're letting too many precious seconds slip away. How much time would you suppose your allies' distraction can buy?"

Ryuu grinned uneasily. She couldn't take all five of them like this; any three would be tough, with their level of skill. But she shook her head. "I'm not alone, eith-!"

A blast of smoke filled the space around her, causing the Circle to flinch back; there was a sound of coughing, and when the air cleared, Ryuu was high in the air from a leap.

"You didn't let me finish my line!" they heard her exclaim, as she sent the Tenkantsuujou into a turret wall to fling herself the opposite way, and tumble onto a rooftop.

Satsuki's teeth ground.

-"*One incapable of fending off a lowlife commoner should hardly consider herself fit to be called your heir."*-

She heard shouts from guards who had been drawn by the sound of the battle; they had witnessed Ryuu, and someone had identified her by her manner of escape.

"Gamagoori!" she said.

"Right!"

"Circle around and try to cut her off," she said, while the Enforcer pressed a large palm to her back. The warm charge of Swift energized her flesh, and she was promptly zipping up a nearby stairway in a rattle of fleeting steps, blurring and dodging past guards as she took off in pursuit.

The rooftop's tiles scattered beneath her feet as she closed in on a retreating back. Ryuu looked back in her sprinting, bewildered, as Satsuki drew back a fist, wringing up still more power.

"*Tora no Y-!* "

She faltered, jumping back as a knife-like projectile thunked into the tiles at her feet. The moment she halted, two light sandals dropped to the rooftop as a new figure barred her path, rising while Ryuu dashed on.

The person was unfamiliar; they wore a dark robe, belted at the waist, over similarly colored pants. A cloth mask concealed the face and hair, showing only bright and fierce eyes. Though shorter even than Ryuu in stature, the intruder stood tall, boasting an ominous presence that threatened of cold lethality, while the frayed ends of a battle-worn scarf swayed in the soundless wind at their back. The tips of a dual-bladed, claw-like gauntlet sparked dangerously upon one hand, burning a line into the rooftop before their feet in a slow, smooth motion of the arm. Satsuki knew she looked upon a being that would rarely allow itself to be glimpsed by its victims, much less observed in full detail - one of an unpredictable race of assassins wielding ancient and mysterious powers.

Darkstrider…

[img:
http://orig14.deviantart.net/3657/f/2016/206/c/4/ninja1400_by_hinata0321-dabd7em.png]

[DARKSTRIDER]

Satsuki took a defensive stance as the warrior facing her spread sandaled feet and flung up both hands in a strange stance, forearms crossed and fingers splayed.

"Let Ryuuko-chan go, or Mako will obliterate you-! Oh, no, I said my name!" a girlish voice squeaked, as the Darkstrider shrank immediately in mortification. Sweatdrops jumped from her face as she turned aside, hands clapping over her mouth. Then her head snapped up with another realization. "Oh, no, I said Ryuuko's name, too! Oh, I said it again! Stupid, Mako, stupid-!"

"Hurry up, Mako!" Ryuu's voice called.

"Roger-! Eep!" she yelped, narrowly dodging a flicker of steel as the princess lunged, a throwing knife in hand.

When Satsuki swung again, the girl vanished in a shadowy blur.

"Sorry about that, Princess Satsuki!" she jabbered as her feet slipped onto the edge of the wall, hands clapped together before her apologetically dipping head. With an acrobatic bounce and another blur she vanished from view.

The princess scowled, fixing her gaze on the now-distant figure racing along the wall and practically bowling through a group of guards.

"My, my, my! That thief's just so quick and cool, isn't she? I can see why you've taken an interest in her, Satsuki-hime!"

She took a breath. "What brings you here, High Sorceress?" she asked, not sparing so much as a glance for the the dainty-looking woman at her back.

"To think she was hiding a name as portentous as 'Ryuuko' in all but plain sight - with a cover as audacious as Ryuu!"

Satsuki glared at the smiling woman. The petite sorceress wore her hair in two extravagant blond pigtails that bounced when she walked; her gait was lilting in heeled slippers and a pastel-colored gown, as she came up to Satsuki's side, her own eyes on the fleeing thief.

"Don't worry - our Ryuuko-chan's name is safe with me! But just think, Satsuki-hime. A thief running free, and a lower-city barbarian setting off explosives across the grounds? Even *our* castle can't cover up a scandal of this magnitude! The thief not only escaped in the presence of the great 'Junpakko,' but relieved her of the great sword Bakuzan. I do imagine that if her heir becomes the laughingstock of the imperial court, Queen Ragyou shall be cross…"

Satsuki's fist clenched.

"I *could* shoot her down again - then it should be clear to everyone that on Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime's watch, the thief would have escaped. But you know…" she began, reaching slender fingers toward Satsuki's breastplate. "There's one more alternative. If you'd like, I might just be able to afford you a bit of assistance-,"

Satsuki held up a hand, and the petite woman halted, dancing eyes flicking up from her armor to her face.

The princess turned, stepping down the walk. As she moved, her left hand trailed up through the air before her, which began to shimmer white. Her eyes already tracked the motion of a figure that raced on tirelessly, knocking aside any guard that came into her path.

"You may be the High Sorceress, but I am far from worthless as a mage."

Frost is versatile. Powerful. Swift.

Her right hand joined her left, and drew back as her arms fell to hold level before her.

And it's the perfect weapon for slowing enemies who are faster than me - weakening those who are stronger than me.

Her hand drew back beside her rigid left arm; a narrow, straight shaft of ice took form as it was pulled from a similarly materializing, phantasmal bow.

The very few enemies though they are.

The thief hopped over the swing of one last guard's halberd, launching herself from its wielder with a foot to the helmet - springing into the air.

Satsuki's eye grew. *NOW!*

The Frost arrow was loosed, and split the night air in a flash of speed, silent and true.

It buried itself in Ryuu's shoulder a hundred meters away, knocking her course wild.

"What a shot!" Nui mused, clapping excitedly. Ignoring her, Satsuki took off for the spot where Ryuu went sprawling down.

Shit!

She barely managed to curl for a mildly better landing as she spun and struck down, bouncing and skidding to a halt. Her breath became fast, and she scowled in displeasure as a chill pulsed from her burning shoulder. Her arm beneath it went rapidly numb. The

arrow - it was ice, glimmering and translucent, like a perfect bolt of sculpted crystal. She cursed her luck, trying to pull it free; it held fast, and the pins and needles overtaking the left side of her body seared for her trouble, too much so for her to want to try forcing it.

A cry of war. She rolled, evading a soldier's sword, and rose to ram into the man, knocking him off-balance before sending a furious roundhouse into his ribs. He smacked helmet-first into the wall beside them, and sprawled down, dazed.

Her mind reeled as another shiver skittered through her torso. Teeth chattering, she traced her mental pile of maps. She'd been moving parallel to the outer wall, going for a stairway a little further on that would take her down a way, and then give her a good shot at pulling off a jump into the sea behind the castle, and slipping away quick and quiet. But this place she'd been shot down - the broad wall beside her housed a single door, and probably led to the great porch overlooking the waters.

Her half-numb ears itched. Swearing, she flung herself down as a volley of spells sprayed explosively across the wall and door behind her. Casters had caught sight of her.

With a growl she rose, shoving with a great effort through the heavy door and lurching aside just before more bolts of Flame and Shock blasted into the darkness before her. They illuminated the space briefly, and crashed into stone steps that spanned the width of the room; when they faded, it fell dark again.

Panting, she hobbled hurriedly forward, a hand pressed about the Frost bolt in her shoulder. She hoped they wouldn't fire blindly through the doorway, as she clambered forward and started quickly as she could up dimly lit stairs.

Her head was pounding as she neared the top; the entire back wall, several dozens of meters across, housed five sets of doors at even intervals. She was at least a few stories above the tall doorway now; her good hand fell, steadying her as she stumbled. She gave a

testing pull on the arrow again, and hissed. The mage who'd shot her was still in range, then, to keep the projectile from losing the enfeebling magics of Frost. If it did, it would lost its special properties and revert to a normal - if prettily-shaped - twig of ice, and even her lowered body temperature would quickly melt it free.

She gritted her teeth as a figure flashed through the doorway below. Someone was inside, heels clacking quickly up the long sweep of steps.

"Ryuu!" the princess yelled, voice reverberating in the space.

Figures! She lay flat and held still, slowing her breath. She knew it was too dark for the other to find her easily, if she didn't move. If the princess shot her again, though, she'd be in deep.

The princess must have assumed she'd run through the doors already. When Satsuki neared, Ryuu kicked her shin.

Her boot met armor with a clang, and with a surprised sound, Satsuki started to stumble back on the steps. Ryuu levered another kick toward her head as she caught herself, but even in the darkness, the princess got an arm up in time to block the blow.

Not ideal, but Satsuki was falling. Ryuu flung herself up and through a set of double doors as the princess caught herself after a few steps, and took off in pursuit again.

All the doors would have opened to the same place - a broad, flat plateau of stone that jutted like a half-hexagon out over the sea. The great porch was supported by a cliff, and long and wide enough to hold a battalion with ease.

Ryuu didn't care about the space. She cared about the pursuers behind her, and how exposed she would be if she didn't reach that edge straight across from her soon. Fifty meters, thirty-five… fifteen, ten, five…

"Don't!"

The arms around her waist tried to drag her back; she fought, but the princess had grabbed her with her head clear of her good arm's elbow. Ryuu was being pulled back. When she swung a fist around, a hand caught her wrist. Satsuki grabbed the sword at Ryuu's belt, and Ryuu locked her cold hand intently on hers, preventing her from drawing it away.

"There's nothing but sharp rocks down there, you oaf-!" Satsuki grunted as Ryuu tried to thrash free. The thief's strength was dampened, but not nearly enough to become insignificant. As if to support her words, the sound of crashing water rang from below, though not so much as a drop of spray reached them at this height.

Doors slammed open - first the most central sets, soon followed by the remainder. Eyes narrowing, Ryuu clenched her hand on Satsuki's wrist and threw her weight backwards. The princess, as expected, struggled back sharply in the direction of safety, cold eyes wide.

Ryuu released her, but the princess wasn't slow enough to overbalance and fall with the sudden lack of resistance. So when Satsuki realized the ruse and reached for her again, Ryuu was prepared to dodge her, catch her arm, and get behind her back. When Ryuu spun them around to face the oncoming horde of soldiers, she'd slipped the Bakuzan from its scabbard, and held its edge to Satsuki's throat.

"Don't shoot!" a voice shrieked from near the head of the crowd. The pink-haired, musical Muddler from the Circle. "That's the *princess*, you hear?! She's got Satsuki-hime, no one shoot!!"

Jakuzure didn't technically have any authority over the castle guard, but the identity of the hostage did well to slow their advance. The guards came quickly to a halt, leaving a generous berth from the thief and the princess; spellcasters faltered, and archers lowered their weapons, stunned.

Satsuki found the eyes of the others of the Circle amid the crowd, each one unblinking in horror. Her own face remained calm, even as she controlled her breath against the fine adamantine edge pressed carefully to her throat. With any amount of force, any motion against its edge, the weapon could split a throat like butter. She spoke in a low voice, lips tight. "You have nothing to gain by killing me, thief. Surrender."

Ryuu's breathing was labored, almost wild. There was no guard wall at the front edge of the porch where they were, no battlements. The wind was cool and fierce, and her feet were inches from the edge. "Maybe I really don't wanna go back to prison, yeah? I'm on death row, remember? Though I've sped up my sentence a good deal. The second you're not in front of me, I'm dead. They won't even haul me out to let the good people of the city see me put down in the plaza. You know how much shit these castle dogs have put me through?" she hissed. "What's say I wanna go out in style, and take a dirty royal with me?"

"You bluff," Satsuki said, feeling her captor's breath shake. The body pressed behind hers wasn't warm, nor was Ryuu's breath on her neck. Her breath barely fogged in the air before them, the way Satsuki's did. "You don't want to do this. You never intended to meet your end here, right?"

Ryuu clicked her tongue, while the tall enforcer, easily visible in the crowd, demanded for her to release the princess. "Maybe things have changed."

"How very vague."

"… Princess. I'm going to give you the sword, on one condition. Dispel this accursed arrow in my shoulder."

"What does the ice arrow matter?"

"What matters is that I've given a right generous offer. Here," she said, easing the blade just a hair clear of her hostage's throat. "Grab

it, under my hand."

It had the make of a two-handed sword; it was easy for Satsuki to grasp the hilt in the space remaining, resting her hand beside Ryuu's. Their audience seemed to tense visibly at the motion. Satsuki still didn't quite have the leverage to trust she could attempt to overpower the other woman safely, given the blade's proximity to her throat.

"Now get rid of the ice bolt. I know - you don't wanna do it without knowing why, but it doesn't make all that much sense, huh? I get my strength back, and I'm still surrounded. But if I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't be bothering with this, now would I? I'll let go of the sword. When that happens, you can turn around and take my head yourself, if you want to. I'll leave it up to you - whether I'm to die by your blade, or let the mages blast me into oblivion and send my fried corpse splatting into the rocks below. What'll it be? No, you don't have to say. Surprise me."

"You're insane," Satsuki said, still trying to make sense of the demand. Ryuu was talking so quickly; she realized it might have been an impulse of nervousness. The thief was apprehensive about her next move as well.

"Stop thinking about it and just do it-,"

A light like the sun burned from the doors to the porch. The brilliant beams shifted and shrank briefly to one doorway, as a figure stepped through behind the multitude of stunned guards.

Satsuki's eyes grew as her radiance poured out across the porch, glaring. Amused red eyes seized on shocked blue.

Ryuu felt the princess tense against her - and the Frost arrow dropped with a splash, half to the stones and half over the edge at her back.

"Now… trust me."

Satsuki felt the thief's hand surrender Bakuzan to her - and with no further notice, with staggering strength, Ryuu pulled and flung them both backwards, clear over the edge.

What? Satsuki thought, suddenly numb as she watched the queen's distant eyes silently grow, the look carrying objective surprise in lieu of despair. She watched her own limbs flail before her, long hair splaying out, hand gripping the sword with worthless, white-knuckled strength, before everything, the Queen, the Circle, the shocked castle guard, vanished behind the leaping horizon of the stone cliff.

What is this? What did I overlook? Stars winked and blurred above her; the sky was spattered with a light patchwork of clouds. Waves cracked below. The wind chopped in her ears as they plunged together through open air. And it occurred to her that Ryuu really was a madwoman. She was a person who would knock vases mindlessly from pedestals, just to see them shatter.

I… miscalculated-

Low, gravelly laughter rumbled at her ear.

The woman huddled against her back had become incredibly *warm* .

"Satsuki-hime!"

"Nonon, wait! It's too l-,"

Uzu's breath caught. The four of them, first to senselessly move, were fully aware of the fact, and all rushing headlong in the face of it.

Too… late?

His teeth ground, as pressure burned in his throat, stung behind his eyes, at the wrongness of it.

"Satsuki-hime!" Nonon wailed. "Satsuki-hime! Satsuki!! Satsu-!"

Uzu grabbed her hand, catching her as she stumbled to halt at the ledge, dropped sobbing to her knees; Houka grabbed onto him in turn, and Ira's arms folded around them all, bracing them, and himself, as he caught up.

And the four were bowled backwards by whipping wind, tossed by a wingbeat monstrous enough to launch an enormous beast into the air above the great porch. Soldiers behind them dropped and rolled backwards, toppling and staggering into each other with a slew of shocked cries and cacophonous clanking of mail on mail and stone.

But this sound paled in comparison to what followed. The reptilian fiend spread leathery wings wide, as if to extinguish the stars; it brandished gleaming, knifelike talons that adorned claws supported by rearing forelegs and muscled hind legs, to hover rampant in the night sky; a head sporting impressive horns drew smoothly back on a long, curved neck, and light glinted harshly from the sleek armor of lustrous scales forged in midnight blue, and from a red-streaked mane than rippled untamed in the wind, from the crown of the skull to the tip of a sturdy, gracefully swinging tail. An underbelly and broad chest lined with a stretch of solid-looking plates expanded with air drawn to capacity, shuddering as fangs were bared on a head drawn high, poised up and back, and seething, brilliantly red orbs with pupils like four-pointed stars beheld the awed humans below with predatory and simmering condescension.

[img: http://orig09.deviantart.net/dc91/f/2016/204/4/5/ryuudragonclr1200_by_hinata0321-dab5n0a.png]

Then the eyes snapped shut, the wings beat and flared once more, and the head lurched forward, razor-lined maw spreading wide about a lolling tongue to send a tremendous blast of air and bone-rattling ferocity down upon the soldiers. The roar was long, full-throated and deep, a calamitous and resounding shriek of might that tore stones and debris from the quailing porch as it drowned a hundred wails of fear. It was fury, raw and imperious; it was splendor, it was wrath. It was a power unheard and undreamt of by mortal men.

Shaking syllables, in breaths of awed terror, arose on countless sets of lips.

'*Ryuu…'*

[DRAGON]

As the roar faded, the creature drew back its head again. Crimson energy glinted in a wave across its scales, building visibly in the chasm of its throat.

A white-clad figure gripping a sword in one hand, dangling from arms clinging tightly to a rearing foreleg, swung an armored boot up in a flailing but decisive move. The dragon's eyes widened as a solid whack to its jaw sent its jet of flame safely over the heads of the buffeted army on the porch. The blast collided momentously with the back wall, just above the sets of doors, and rattled it with explosive force.

With a growling huff, and one more venomous look, the dragon smoothly rose and spun. Evidently it was satisfied: wings unfurled, billowed with air, and propelled the beast away from the castle with a sure crack, sending it soaring in a smooth arc off into the night.

Behind the battered soldiers, before the wall now alight with splattered flame, Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou stood alone and unshaken. Crimson eyes were wide, unblinking with cold and mirthful exhilaration as she watched the dragon depart.

Life is so very…

A thrilled shiver raced along her spine, and a lofty smile spread to bare the elongated canine teeth behind brightly painted lips.

Amusing!

~ ~

Pilot: The Princess and RYUU

End

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1. The currency of the kingdom is called rin (, 'scales').

2. or , *ryuu,* does typically refer to the Chinese depiction of dragons, whereas the dragon form here obviously leans more toward the western-style dragon. Still chose 'ryuu' for pun purposes, and also because the more common way to refer to a Western dragon is literally 'doragon' - the English word 'dragon' transliterated to Japanese syllables. That said, in an English work, it doesn't make sense to keep loanwords like that in Japanese, so I'd simply use 'dragon' over something like 'doragon.' So in short, dragons in this world are Western-style dragons but called 'ryuu'.

3. As of now, this is a standalone/piloty sort of thing. I have a lot of ideas for it, though, so if I'm inspired to continue it, this might turn out like that AtEoD oneshot so long ago that later became chapter 1 of AtEoD. If I do continue, I see it being a more laid-back/free write than AtEoD, which was pretty thoroughly planned and plotted out before it was continued beyond its original oneshot; I have major plot points in mind, but I'll aim to write and post as I go.

4. Tenkantsuujou - 'Heaven-piercing walking stick.' Okay, okay, the 'staff' translation of jou might be more appropriate here XD

5. Kanji/furigana trolling: Satsuki shows us that the word (normally read 'ninja') is, inexplicably, read in this world as 'darkstrider (lit. *daakusutoraidaa*)'.

Illustrations are on my fanfiction-art sideblog **here**. Most that aren't up already will be posted within a few days of this posting, but for

spoiler-avoidance purposes, that last illustration will probably get a longer wait. A few other WIP character arts are also up already.

Beyond the Gates

Chapter 2: Beyond the Gates

As the Circle sets out in pursuit of the princess, Satsuki and Ryuu land beyond the capital city, and find the wilds less than hospitable in the night.

Heya! After quite a delay, a sudden burst of inspiration came recently and a lot of things I'd planned for this story fell into place. The result is that the story is pretty nicely outlined now, and I'm really excited to continue it! *It's spawned legit cover art now and everything* *You can gauge my excitement by my art output clearly*

I can't predict how long this story will be, but I've got a few more chapters similar in length to this one written, and much more to come. On a side note, I know I've told a few people (my partner included) in personal conversations that a certain character is set to first appear in Chapter Two, but because of the way I've broken things up, it'll be in Chapter 3 after all. Sorry about that ^^' But I plan to post Chapter 3 pretty soon, since it was originally going to be part of this chapter.

Note that in the new cover illustration, the dragon shown is more like an Oriental dragon to fit the tiger/dragon theme. This isn't meant to be representative of the design of Ryuu's dragon form, though, which is the same as it was before (the description and illustration late last chapter).

Artwork/illustrations are still being posted on my art sideblog here.

Enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Chapter Two \ Beyond the Gates

Shouts rang across the grand porch, piercing the smoke-stained air and the continuing magical drone of the alarm. Stunned soldiers moved groggily clear as firefighting squads went to work on the back wall, quelling the spread of vibrant flames.

"'Ryuu." A hoarse laugh. "Ryuu is a *ryuu* . Are you serious?" The mutterer's fingers dug into the old leather of his summoning tome. "I should have known this! If I'd had the information for her, Satsuki-hime would never have been caught off guard!"

"Even the best set of ears can't uncover a secret of which no one speaks," another man said. The speaker's hand clapped him on the shoulder. "Get a hold of yourself, Inumuta. None will fault you for failing to anticipate something like this."

"Sanageyama…"

"We've got to do what we can now, yeah?" the knight reminded him, eyes settling solemnly on the rest of the Circle a few dozen meters away. He cracked a smile in spite of himself, teeth gritting momentarily. "Besting the dragon that bested our Princess - there could be no finer a task for a knight of my caliber!"

Houka's brow quirked as the swordsman threw back his head and laughed at a pitch just a bit too high. "Who needs to get a hold of himself, really?"

"I'm getting fired up!" Sanageyama cut back, hand smacking flat against his breastplate with a clang.

The fierce timbre of Gamagoori's voice could be heard across the porch. "Grant me permission to assemble a force to pursue Satsuki-hime!"

The sleek words of reply shared none of the man's urgency. "Newly-appointed Chief of Enforcers. To whom do you suppose you speak?"

The hulking man took an immediate step back, under the focus of narrowing crimson eyes. He dropped in an immaculate bow, cursing inwardly as sweat flecked from his creased forehead. Wide eyes snapped shut. "Your Majesty, Queen Ragyou. I had more contact with the prisoner Ryuu than have any of your soldiers, my queen. If I may be so bold, I request your authorization to take responsibility for the pursuit and retrieval of the Princess. However recent my promotion, the castle guard's failure tonight is my own. My compatriots and I will return your daughter safely to the castle - I swear it on my life!"

"And should my girl already lie broken and lifeless in that creature's jaws…" The queen's tone was not harsh; her demeanor was intense, but not altogether troubled. She flicked open a folding fan, sniffing at the smoky air around them as the accessory hid a lofty smirk. "Will you so eagerly take responsibility then?"

His lip twitched. "Satsuki-hime is alive. If the beast… whatever she is, if this *Ryuu* had wished her dead, she wouldn't have gone to the trouble of carrying her away. She's a thief, not an assassin."

"Clearly. Had she been a rebel assassin, you would by now have long since let my dear Satsuki perish."

"I…" He finally shook.

But Satsuki was alive, and he didn't intend to see that change any time soon.

"I will protect the Princess."

"Any of us would," Jakuzure Nonon added near his side. All nearly-five feet of her fought not to waver as the queen's gaze flicked her way.

"You four would fight a dragon for my daughter?"

Gamagoori lifted his eyes, resolute. "However formidable the adversary, we will fight, and we will triumph."

The white-clad monarch snapped her fan shut with a sigh. "Ransom or leverage… It is probable that the thief sees value in keeping the princess alive. Scurry on, then. Assume the insurgents have something *dangerous* at their disposal… and select whatever soldiers you please, Chief of Enforcers."

"At once!" he said, standing. "I already have an exceptional unit in mind…"

He turned to meet the eyes of three others in turn. Without a word, they rushed for one of the great doorways from the porch.

"*My*," a newcomer mused daintily. "I daresay, Queen Ragyou, had you forbidden their departure they may well have made off on this errand regardless!"

"Doubtless," the queen agreed, shutting her eyes with a hum. "How fortunate of that daughter of mine to have such faithful hooligans at her disposal…"

"Shall I monitor their performance, my queen?"

"Now, Nui, we needn't hasten things along; let us see how the coming days unfold. I have use of you in the Bloodforge, for now."

The attention of the High Sorceress turned fully to the queen, and a thrill of amusement sparked in her eyes. "Queen Ragyou," she said, surprised. "We're proceeding with that one, then?"

A nod. "I want it to be in flawless condition, when the time is right. Fret not; I shall be nothing short of astonished if you're presented no further opportunities to play with this Ryuu."

The sight of clouds racing beneath them was exhilarating and terrifying.

The terror registered only in a distant part of Satsuki's mind, as the slow, rhythmic chop of wingbeats sounded over the wind that shrieked past her ears. She was no fool; a drop from this height would bring her demise. She was very much so in her abductor's domain, and the time to struggle was not upon her, here in the boundless skies.

The exhilaration had been more than enough to widen her eyes, and make her heart race, as the dragon had soared into the night. But she had kept her wits about her, and minded their path; out of view of the castle, Ryuu had risen well above the clouds, and circled to the side and back. Satsuki had nary a means of gauging their speed, but knew they had gone back over the city, rather than strike blindly out over the sea behind the castle.

But such emotions and thoughts were beginning to numb to her, now - numb as her fingertips in their gloves, which might have been burning from her clinging too tightly to the dragon's foreleg minutes ago. Frost had gradually tinted the gauntlet on her forearm, edging the steel in a lacework of crystalline white. Her muscles were coldly taut with effort, even as she rose and fell, rocked as gently as by ocean waves in time with the whip of great, leathery wings. The air was too thin. Her eyelashes seemed brittle when she blinked. Redness had seeped to line the glossy, midnight blue scales beneath one of her gloves; she wondered if her grasp had bruised the fabric and the fingers within against rough scales, but she dared not move her hand to inspect it.

Her teeth clenched; she shook her head, focusing to wakefulness.

"Land," she rasped. Her lip curled fiercely, and she raised her voice. "*Ryuu!* I command you to descend!"

Above, at the end of a long, armored neck, a gleaming crimson eye's star-shaped pupil lurched around toward her. A muted rumble ground tensely past bared fangs, and the eye darted forward again.

Dumb beast…

The dragon's head lowered, the foreleg extending upward slightly. Satsuki's eyes grew harsh as a fang-lined maw spread open, her body hoisted up before it. Her hand, numb as it was, grasped still tighter on the Bakuzan's hilt.

The air that poured from between Ryuu's fangs was like that at the mouth of a furnace. It was first shocking to her chilled form, but after a few breaths, Satsuki felt some feeling return to her limbs as she was bathed in rolling warmth.

She shut her eyes, teeth clenched. Ryuu pumped a few more breaths across her, and lowered the princess again as her fangs sealed intently. Another rumble shuddered in the beast's throat and chest, restrained, crisp as distant thunder.

Satsuki couldn't be certain how much time passed before she realized they were shedding altitude. Clouds leapt to overtake her vision and flash away again, and her eyes locked scrutinously on the sight of deep blue-green - a forest stretched out below.

They were well beyond the city's walls.

And dropping too rapidly for comfort. Ryuu's wings held a steady angle, dragging her trajectory forward; Satsuki had a moment to judge the speed and distance before she pulled up her knee, let her hands slip from Ryuu's foreleg, and shoved away with an armor boot.

As fine as its fabric was, her white outer cloak tore in places as her back crashed through branches; tree limbs snapped against the steel of the back of her breastplate, and her hands guarded the back of her skull as a branch caught her behind the thighs, flipping her backwards. Blinking, she managed to plant a foot on a sturdy branch as she came upright again, but her reflexes remained sluggish; when the forest shook with the crash of Ryuu's landing some thirty meters ahead, Satsuki slipped before she could balance herself. She sprawled toward the earth, rolling over her shoulder with a grunt and coming to balance in a crouch.

At the edge of a glade, trees that had been clipped by Ryuu's colossal form lay broken and splintered, leafy branches heaped in her wake amid gouged-out swatches of upturned grass and earth. The dragon truly was immense, Satsuki marveled, now that she could observe her in full. The dragon lay awkwardly in the shallows of a lake, twisted half onto her back. She dragged drooping wings from the water, thrashing them dry as she scrambled and turned upright, shaking her body to scatter water and mist. A groggy shake of her head, tossing a sodden, red-streaked mane, and she leapt from the lake in a single bound.

The beast's shoulder rested well above the height of a man; her head, held aloft by a long neck, would have overlooked a single-story building by a comfortable margin. Her tail swept out behind her, easily matching the length of her body.

Her eyes were red like embers in the darkness; pupils like four-pointed stars twitched, unfocused. She didn't seem to see, or even recall the princess nearby. A snarl had bared her fangs in their entirety, and the growl in her throat was steady.

Ryuu reared on her hind legs, threw back her head, and roared, crimson flames spraying extravagantly into the air above. As she fell again, she bounded forward; Satsuki tensed, but the dragon rammed her shoulder into a tree, cracking the trunk in two. Fangs closed on another trunk, and this tree was uprooted, plucked as easily as a daisy as she wrenched back, cracking the tree into others before

casting it aside. Light glinted smartly across her scales, and she sent a missile of flame scorching from her jaws into the treetops; popping leaves and limbs combusted brilliantly beneath it before the blast exploded a hundred meters off, blinding in the night.

Satsuki felt the warmth against her face as she witnessed it. She stood motionless as another roar shook the forest; she was ready to move, but Ryuu was aimless, head whipping about, eyes casting around blindly in fury. Her horns hacked trees in two; her claws smashed boulders to pieces; her tail leveled an area in a mighty sweep, in the blink of an eye, sending leaves, branches, and splinters scattering in gusting winds. She was like a storm - a force of nature, unable to be contained even in the towering body of a beast.

Finally, the intensity in her eyes burned out, and the dark rubies, clouding, shifted to sapphire blue. Wings and tail drooped, and only steam poured from her grumbling jaws. Steam rolled from her entire form, in fact, skittering brightly from the surface of her scales - and with a burst of it, the dragon vanished.

Leaving her cover, Satsuki walked through the clearing haze, stepping over various bits of debris. She halted before the nude form of a shivering girl who lay flat on her face, dark blue hair, usually bound in a tie, hanging messily to her shoulders and blackened with moisture. The knuckles of one hand were white against the crimson polearm she'd wielded before. Her back was streaked with liquid, sweat or mist, Satsuki couldn't be certain.

And the mark of the Frost arrow that had pierced her shoulder, surely not an hour prior, was no more than the pale beginnings of a scar.

"*Ryuu* ." She said it not as one says another's name. It was a label now.

The girl's back shook on a cough. Somewhere nearby, in the blazing forest, a tree limb fell with a crack and crash, embers swirling around

as it did. The cries and caws of agitated fauna could be heard from the depths of the forest.

Ryuu had pushed with one hand onto her side, and tipped from there onto her back. Weary blues studied the figure above - beautiful, straight-backed, and chin held high even with her clothes and shining armor battered, her sharp face streaked with dirt.

"It's a little like… how we first met, yeah?" Ryuu chuckled.

Her eyes didn't leave those of the princess as the Bakuzan's tip rested at her throat.

She smiled wryly. "Seeing that shape… tends to bring out something ugly in humans. You're the last person I shoulda' thought would be different." She had never truly let herself expect that the princess smuggling food to her cell, and a few minutes of sharing music with her, could make things any better.

Satsuki's brow was stern, as if to confirm Ryuu's thoughts. "In the name of Kiryuuin, you shall submit."

"The royal bloodline's right to challenge? Taking it up now against a defenseless little girl? That's cold, Princess."

"It does not please me, but I will take the advantage you were careless enough to present. And of all people, *you* bear the name Ryuuko, do you not? I would assume you're aware of the weight that accompanies it. Knowing this, of course I can't permit you to go free."

Ryuu's carefree mask hardened at that; internally, she might have grimaced. *Nice one, Mako…*

Yeah, Ryuu knew of the so-called prophecy. She didn't want any part in it.

"You brought me all the way here, but you wore yourself out," Satsuki observed. "If you know of my right to challenge, then you should know you ought to make this simple for yourself. Can you stand against me in your current condition?"

"You threatenin' me?"

"What if I am-?"

Ryuu rolled sharply aside, hurling her shoulder against Satsuki's shins with enough force to stagger her. Satsuki recovered her footing, swinging the blade around, but Ryuu was already on her feet, lunging her way. She grasped Satsuki's wrist in one hand, and the Bakuzan's hilt in the other, but couldn't wrest it from the princess's grasp before a knee jammed against her back; hissing, she swung Satsuki around and shoved with her legs, driving the taller woman's back against a tree.

Satsuki couldn't budge her; even weakened, the thief had more strength left than was reasonable, and Satsuki was far from peak condition herself. But her eyes widened silently at the sight of the angled pair of horns now resting upon the crown of Ryuu's skull.

"Look here," Ryuu growled, eyes flashing red. "Do you know how sarden tough it is to fly over a city without lettin' loose a single roar?"

"What kind of imbecilic question is that?"

"I didn't know, either!" Ryuu continued regardless. "But I'm in a right cross mood about now, Princess-!"

Satsuki hooked her ankle on the inner side of one of Ryuu's and shoved from the tree, toppling her; Ryuu tried to leverage the sword upward as they fell, and Satsuki hooked one of the spikes patterning her gauntlet against its blade, pressing down to pin the sword's tip against the earth, its edge resting above Ryuu's throat, while the girl's hands held fast on the hilt and Satsuki's wrist.

"The blood of a dragon courses through your veins. I don't know why, and I don't know what exactly you are," Satsuki said, "but you were right, back there. It changes everything."

"Does it?" Ryuu scowled. "You really wanna throw down, right now? I want the bloody sword, sure. What're you after, Kiryuuin?"

The princess's smirk above her was coldly ambitious.

"I'm going to tame you."

Ryuu was surprised only a moment. When it passed, her grin bared her teeth, fierce. "You think you can? I hope you don't expect all you'll need is the blood of dragon tamers that flows through your veins."

Their eyes held for several seconds, and then snapped aside together as a screech pierced the air.

Such sounds had been vaguely noticeable in the forest, but only now was one near enough to be distinct and sharp above the ambient roar and crackle of flames. Its source was a hairy, skeletal quadruped that tore from the trees on clawed feet, the body of a canine supporting a head like a bat's, needle-like teeth gnashing between screeches of anger.

Ryuu surrendered her grip on the sword as Satsuki rose. The princess took the greatsword in both hands, stepping strongly forward; it gave a low *whoosh* as she spun to meet the creature squarely with an edge of the Bakuzan, cleaving its skull in two.

Mild surprise came to Satsuki's eye as it crumpled. "It didn't react…"

"Blinded by the flames," Ryuu muttered, putting her back to hers. "I messed up. They're confused, and pissed as hell."

"They…" Satsuki frowned as more of them leapt from the trees around them, drawn by the noise. Some sprinted, while others

stretched back wings fused to flexible forelegs to leap by air. Screeches sounded all around the two, rattling discordantly as the fiends closed in.

Satsuki extended a hand, and an ache seemed to pry on her nerves as a feeble puff of Frost dissipated from her palm. *I channeled too much Magic earlier… !*

Her hand returned to its place on the Bakuzan, and she swung to slash three of the fiends from the air. She lunged, driving the blade into another's mouth and out of the back of its skull before planting a foot on its chest to free her weapon in a shower of dark blood.

Behind her, Ryuu fended off several of the creatures with her staff, cracking it sharply into their ribs and skulls. But she was far from full power; she went for a flying one a second too slowly, and it buried its fangs in her arm. She yelled, staggering with it and squeezing a hand on its skull as its hind talons scrabbled at her bare stomach and thighs.

Another lunged for her, only to be crushed beneath an overhead swing of the Bakuzan. Satsuki swung for another, larger one, but her grip was faltering. The wounds on her finger and palm had reopened, and the hilt slipped from a bloody grasp as she cracked the blade through bone, sending a jolt through her throbbing hand.

The Bakuzan was clattering away as three more fiends leapt for her back.

Ryuu flung a limp creature aside - its skull finally crushed in her grip - and leapt, spinning, to intercept them. Her back was turning toward them as they neared; she looked as if she might be prepared to spin into a kick.

Light played oddly on the air, hinting of a phantom shape at Ryuu's back. Satsuki would have thought she'd imagined it, had the creatures not been swatted back by astounding force, patches of fur

and skin shaved free of their broken forms. Two collided with others on the advance, knocking them back.

The dragon's… tail?

And Ryuu pushed Satsuki down; she vaulted smoothly over her back to swing her heel into a snarling beast's skull, dropping it.

Ryuu was panting, stance low, as more closed in. Shaking, she threw her hands back, squeezed her eyes shut, and loosed a wicked scream, a yell, that brought the lot of the attackers faltering to a halt.

Not missing a beat, Satsuki spun at her back, dropped - and hacked Ryuu's feet from under her, with a sharp leg sweep to the ankles. The dragon girl was smacking down on her side and rear, a hoarse curse starting in her throat, when the Princess threw out her arms with a regal shout. In a radius that spread rapidly from her, the beasts around them were peeled from their feet and flung backwards through the air.

As the blast subsided, Ryuu dived for the Bakuzan on the ground, rolling to her feet with it in one hand and the Tenkantsuujou in the other. She held the precious blade close a moment, scouting the vicinity. The beasts that had landed within a couple dozen meters were recovering; still more hung back, shrieking and hissing. She considered the princess a few strides away.

"Here!" she snarled, tossing her the blade.

Satsuki caught it in her good hand, and it was lowered nearly to the ground before she stopped its weight; it was by an incredible feat of strength and will that she lifted the zweihander steady again, her arm taut, holding it at the ready while her shoulders shook in time with her breath.

"Figured you couldn't channel any more magic for now," Ryuu observed, crimson eyes not straying from the wary beasts that

surrounded them as she stepped slowly over. She put her back across from Satsuki's again.

"I can't," Satsuki confirmed, jaw set.

"So you burned up some life force…" She smirked. "Neat trick, but how many more times can you pull it off?"

Satsuki didn't correct her. She glanced back, seeing the blood that ran to the earth from Ryuu's scraped abdomen and legs, and from the bite wound in her arm. "There are too many of them to handle in our present conditions. We need to repel them until they lose interest, or we need to run." But her look was grim. An unaugmented human, and even whatever Ryuu was - neither was built to outpace creatures such as these, much less while exhausted. "Seeing as you haven't transformed, I'll assume you're unable to. Unfortunately, you're not terribly intimidating as you are."

Ryuu snorted, but soon made a contemplative sound. "… Princess? Can you trust me again?"

"It went splendidly for me last time, didn't it?" Satsuki scoffed.

"Look, you-,"

"If you have a way out of this, be my guest."

Ryuu turned partially toward her. "Alright…" She began to reach out her hand, voice factually curt. "I'll - I'll need to touch you."

"To-?"

At that moment, a yowl sounded from the nearby trees. A creature much like the others burst through the brush at the edge of the glade - the difference being that it stood several meters high. Its tongue lolled about a row of long, slender teeth as it barreled toward them.

Satsuki began to turn the Bakuzan its way, eyes wide.

Two arms folded around her waist as Ryuu pressed to her back. The next Satsuki knew her armor was unhooked from the side, and an icy hand slipped up her shirt, pressed directly to her flesh.

And in a flash, Satsuki was cold.

It didn't make sense. All she knew was that her body felt as it might if she had been plunged into ice water, limbs weakening lethargically, extremities once again numb. Ryuu's hand on her abdomen felt briefly like it burned, and pulled away. And Satsuki found her grip slackening, her knees bending, as the frothing beast before her drew near.

Trust you? she thought, teeth clenching bitterly.

A grip on her shoulder, and Ryuu pulled and flung.

Satsuki's shocked blue eyes took the girl in for the instant before the great beast's skull impacted Ryuu's side with a sickening crunch.

Ryuu's mouth popped open, as if in surprise, as her body yielded to the impact; a trail of red painted the air from her lips. She shot straight back, smashing heavily to the earth and tumbling uncontrollably along until she sailed out over the lake.

Satsuki landed on her side and rolled twice, trying to rise into a crouch. She inhaled in a hiss.

"Ryuuko!" she shouted, as the girl began to fall.

But a lopsided grin was unfurling upon Ryuu's face, as she turned in the air. In one heartbeat, Satsuki read the syllables that played upon bloody lips.

[FLASHPOINT]

Ryuu fell, and impacted the lake as might a vat of molten metal.

The water churned, contracting from the surface. Then it burst outward in a spherical wave of white water and vaporizing mist, exploding into the air above the lake.

The beast that had rammed her drew to a halt an instant before a sleek, reptilian form sprang from the lake with a mighty roar, wings splaying wide. The creature didn't have long to react before the now-larger monster was upon it; talons seized upon its hide, and the dragon's fangs snapped into its throat, the strike swifter than that of a serpent. Ryuu thrashed her neck and tore, flinging an arc of crimson into the moonlit air before she spat contemptfully aside.

'*You think I'm the prey'…*

Satsuki was silent in something akin to awe as the dragon raised its head and unleashed a roar of primal supremacy. The lesser beasts keened shrilly, turning tail and vanishing into the forest. Ryuu roared again for good measure, and sank knifelike fangs viciously into the side of the lifeless beast, opening its skin, snapping and tearing ravenously.

The line of Satsuki's lips was momentarily disturbed; then her brow set resolutely. However cold her body, a storm was brewing in her heart.

Legends spoke of the power before her as the might to melt and reforge kingdoms, to shape eras themselves - the power to overturn all reason.

Here before her, it was catastrophe given form. It was primitive, unrefined; yet for the one who commanded it, razing armies to the ground would prove a magnificent spectacle, if a trivial feat. This power defied all apparent limitations of the magics and warcraft man had honed and turned against man for millennia.

It was then, with full respect for its dreadful magnitude, that Kiryuuin Satsuki vowed to see that power bend to her will.

~ ~

Beyond the Gates

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/92e1/f/2017/077/1/2/sanagamapairsmall_by_hinata0321-db2oosf.png]

End

Flashpoint (, hakkaten) - the point at which the half-dragon has amassed sufficient energy to assume dragon form.

Strange Respite

Chapter 3: Strange Respite

A princess, two thieves, a Darkstrider, and a dog spend a night under the same roof.

Get ready for some powers to be explained by questionable use of thermodynamics and magical mass-energy equivalence I'm a physicist and I can guarantee you it's bad

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(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Chapter Three \ Strange Respite

A hand rapped a few quick times on the door.

Ryuu fidgeted uneasily. When several moments had passed, she raised her hand again, just as the door opened a crack.

Behind a chain lock, Mikisugi's eyes went round at the sight of her. He shifted slightly, undoubtedly relaxing his grip on a pistol hidden from view. His lips twitched soundlessly.

"Sensei!" the young woman said, soft but urgent. Her face was red. "I kind of - I kidnapped the princess."

He snorted, eyes still wide on his disciple - a woman who had been captured by the royal guard, and whom he'd fully prepared to mourn

as dead. "Ryuu, that's a terrible joke. What, did you snatch her away from the highest tower?"

"Sort of?" Ryuu said, blinking in surprise.

An eye narrowing on the sheepish girl, Mikisugi undid the chain that held the door.

As he opened it fully, he finally caught sight of the severe-looking woman at Ryuu's side, and the insignia on her breastplate.

The door slammed shut.

Satsuki shot Ryuu a look. The shorter woman bit her lip, and raised a hand to knock again. Again, the door opened before she could knock: Mikisugi stood inside, a pistol cocked toward the princess.

"Are you out of your bloody mind, Ryuu?"

"Couldn't say for sure," she said, ducking smoothly behind Satsuki. The princess's hand rested on Bakuzan's hilt, but she didn't hazard to see if she could draw before the man could shoot. "Hand it over," Ryuu coaxed, gripping it by the sheath.

Satsuki surrendered it with a scowl, and Ryuu steered her through the doorway. Mikisugi backed away, keeping out of her reach as his aim remained trained on the princess; Satsuki strode at a comfortable pace through the doorway, her head high.

Briefly she surveyed the layout of the front room. It was extended from some manner of shop, the place largely styled after ways of the old kingdom. There were wooden floors with a rug, a couch of middling quality, a tiled area about a hearth; a newspaper and tobacco pipe rested on a coffee table, as did a quill pen and inkwell. She turned her attention back to the one trying to threaten her.

"Why is this man naked?" the long-haired woman asked, looking down her nose at him.

"He's in his own house," Ryuu muttered. "Just be glad we caught him with some underwear on."

"I told you to *avoid* the Junpakko - not bring her home with you!"

"I mean, I got my hands on the sword plenty of times, but then I had to let her hold it so I could transform. We landed in the wilds outside the city - and then I needed to let her wield it when these ruddy fiends attacked us - and the entire hike back, she wouldn't ease up!"

Mikisugi's look was nonplussed as he patched it together. "Ryuu… what have you done? Where did you - how many people saw?"

"I… well…"

"The majority of the castle guard," Satsuki provided. "The chief of Enforcers, several high-ranking knights, dozens of court mages, the High Sorceress, *and* the Queen herself bore witness. And in spite of this you intend to, what, use me as a bargaining chip? To steal the sword and stay large-scale retaliation?"

"Ryuu," the sensei groaned. "All of this, for one mark? Don't tell me…"

"It's strange," Satsuki noted. "Gamagoori was doubtful that you're truly in league with rebels. But what would motivate a mere thief to so doggedly pursue my Bakuzan?"

Mikisugi scoffed nervously, though his pistol was steady. "You speak as though this girl's actions can be explained logically. But, Ryuu - how long did you even hold onto it? You grew attached too quickly, didn't you?"

"What…?" Satsuki asked.

"I'm cursed, I tell you. I didn't even have it in hand for that long. But, maybe the amount of time I spent thinking about it before I even left on the job… And the feel of it, the smell of it, the balance of its

weight - the hilt inlaid with jewels - the way it *shines* darkly in the light, with such an entrancing luster - it's j-just, such a sarden *lovely* thing!" Ryuu cried emphatically, as if that explained it.

Satsuki spared a glance for the babbling girl; Ryuu's eyes rose from the weapon as she clutched it in tensing hands.

"Ryuu," Mikisugi said, "That… *impulse* is what landed you in hot water with the boss to begin with."

"You know I can't help it, it just - *happens* . On that note, I need to have a chat with our good boss sometime soon-,"

Satsuki ducked suddenly aside; Mikisugi's finger twitched, but he didn't fire, as she was clear of his aim. As she'd suspected, his eyes flickered toward her thigh, not her trunk or head, as he adjusted his aim, now actually intent to fire.

Her gauntlet cracked into the pistol's barrel, swatting it aside. She grasped his wrist, and as his free arm prepared to throw a knifehand, she drove a palm into his shoulder. He cringed as the air hummed briefly, and his arm hung limp.

"Oi!" Ryuu shouted; rather than draw the sword, she'd dropped it and lunged for the princess. Satsuki was facing her when a deep sound rattled the room.

"*BOOF!* "

What now? she thought, as the sound repeated, louder, accompanied by heavy, scrambling footsteps.

Ryuu's attention turned to a hall leading from the room just as an immense, dark-furred creature barreled past a corner into view, smacking momentarily into the hallway wall with its haste. Thick, large paws clopped and slipped over each other, nails scrabbling to attain purchase on the wooden floor, before the beast directed itself

forward into the room in powerful bounds, shaggy fur rippling across its form as it leapt with a thunderous bark.

Satsuki was prepared to defend herself when she ascertained its trajectory, and watched it sail past her, into Ryuu's opening arms, as the girl's eyes lit up with joy.

"Senketsu!" she squealed in the moment before being bowled from her feet.

She met the floor with an 'oof' and ran her hands up into its fur, ruffling it as the beast gave a higher-pitched bellow in her face, and then a whimper, as if in reprimand. Then it lapped at her face enthusiastically, laying trails of slobber across her cheeks as she spat and laughed and rubbed its ears.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she sputtered between licks. "I know, I'm a dolt, getting caught and all. You didn't worry yourself sick, did ya' boy?"

Mikisugi sighed, and the princess shot him a look. He set his weapon down on a desk, working his shoulder uncomfortably. "What say you to a momentary truce? I've no desire to shoot anyone with a dog in the room."

She said nothing to him, but studied Ryuu as she rose, wiping her face on the fine sleeve of the coat Satsuki had lent her. "What manner of fiend is this, thief?"

"This is my best mate, Sen-," she grunted as he gave a surprisingly agile (and trusting) hop, forcing Ryuu to catch him in her arms. "This is Senketsu," she finished. He wagged a fluffy tail energetically beneath him, tongue lolling in contentment and ears perked up. He inspected the room from this new vantage point and finally settled his eye on the stranger beside Mikisugi - one eye, for the other lay shut behind a few gnarled scars.

"That's no dog. That's a bear," Satsuki said, appalled. As if to assert its identity to the contrary, the canine gave a curt 'wuff,' eye friendly and bright.

"He ain't a bear! Look at him," Ryuu said simply, ruffling her hand across a white pattern on his chest. Hanging from a string, a fang many times too large to be his own adorned his chest like a pendant.

Perhaps it had been Ryuu's. Satsuki grimaced.

"*Senketsu* must weigh more than you do," the princess persisted, even while noting the patches of white and red-brown on its body, set against black fur. It had a large, boxy head. It was not like any of the working hounds she'd seen, but admittedly unlike a bear. "I don't know what that is, but it's no dog."

"He's a momma's boy," Mikisugi muttered.

"Don't worry about that scowling lady, she's loony," Ryuu cooed to the shaggy beast, scratching him under the chin. "Doesn't even know a dog when she sees one…" He gave her arm a play bite, evidently gentle about the grip of his teeth, while Satsuki cringed to think of letting any piece of her within the jaws of such a beast.

"Sensei," Ryuu said more seriously, "could you spare the princess some first-aid, and a meal? I owe her that much."

"What about you?" Mikisugi asked, surprised.

"I want a meal, too. I kind of expect that much?"

"Of course," he groaned.

"How often will your top disciple bust out of a maximum security royal prison?"

"Never again, I hope - it would require your being captured first…" He ran a hand through his hair. "It would cause too much of a stir for either of you to be seen out and about. If no one's keeling over just

yet, I'll put leftover soup on to heat, and then we can take a look at your wounds."

"What a victory feast," Ryuu chortled, but the look she gave her sensei was appreciative.

"I'm not sure 'victory' is what I'd call this. But we'll get it sorted out. If such paltry fare will not offend our guest…?"

Satsuki had been assessing them at length. Finally she shut stern eyes. "I shall eat."

"Swell!" Ryuu said, clapping her hands together. Senketsu scrambled, somehow in the course of a short drop putting all four paws under him.

"Awesome! What're we eating?!" said the Darkstrider girl at Ryuu's side.

Satsuki blinked. In the next moment, she and Mikisugi had both leapt back, hurriedly distancing themselves from the new arrival.

"Mako!" Ryuu cried, throwing her arms around the girl. "I was startin' to get worried!"

The eyes visible through the mask were creased with mirth; a girlish laugh came bubbling out as Ryuu spun her around. "I told mom I was off to break Ryuu-chan out of prison, so she cooked a ton of her Lower-City famous mystical croquettes but I couldn't carry them on me because I need space to carry weapons so I went back home to get them before I came here- Ryuu-chaaan, you're crushing me, silly!"

"Sorry!" She set the shorter woman on her feet. Mako reached behind her back and somehow produced a wrapped lunchbox larger than her head, holding it up proudly.

"… Mako," Mikisugi interrupted, "How did you get in?"

"I used the door, Mr. Mikisugi!" she said, nodding twice.

"A-ha," he said glumly, quirking a brow. He massaged his temples. "Soup and croquettes, a feast for champions," he muttered, walking into his kitchen. "M'lady princess, would you fancy coffee or tea-?"

He paused as she shot him a look of distaste.

"Tea. Of course," he said, dipping his head and slipping from the room. Certain vestiges of the ancient kingdoms were perfectly commonplace, as much a part of modern society as anything if one didn't bother reflecting too long on distinguishing origins; the architecture, common in much of Middle City, and the style of dress the thieves were partial to, were examples of things considered harmless despite evolving from the old times. Even if the forgotten monarchs had fallen, it was impossible to extinguish all traces of the cultures of their lands, however the early rulers of the dynasty might have tried.

Satsuki's own armor, with its elaborate metal plates, was modeled in a make reminiscent of great warriors of the bygone era, and Nonon fancied dabbling in instruments of the old times, such as that stringed one - the *violin*, if Satsuki recalled - she was so skilled at sharpening her Muddling with. But a miscellany of facets, like the consumption of the black drink coffee, were viewed by the nobility as improper and crass at best, habits exclusive to commoners.

"Mako will have tea, too!" the Darkstrider called happily, waving. "Senketsu! How are you?" Mako squealed, attention pinballing to the dog. Tail wagging at the sudden attention, he gave a jovial 'bwoof!' in answer, loose gums flapping out from his snout with the utterance, as she knelt to scratch his ears.

[img: http://orig14.deviantart.net/c22e/f/2017/086/8/c/ryuusenfin_by_hinata0321-db3qp0k.png]

"Oi," Ryuu said to the princess, who still stood alertly near the wall. "I don't know what they taught you at the castle, but could you cool it on the glares? This Darkstrider won't hurt you. Not unless you give her a reason, anyway-,"

"Oh! My! Gosh!" Mako squealed, snapping straight. The sudden movement did wonders for Satsuki's nerves. "I didn't introduce myself to Satsuki-hime-sama!"

Satsuki stared blankly as the Darkstrider ripped off her mask, revealing a short bob of brown hair and brilliantly energetic amber eyes above a toothy, amiable grin. She jerked a thumb her way, a hand on her hip.

"I'm Ryuu-chan's occasional partner in crime, Mankanshoku Mako! Pleased to meetcha'!"

The princess didn't let on her thoughts as she considered her. Though harebrained at a glance, something about her intensity was undeniably formidable. Darkstriders were masters of trickery. Could she be the sort who relaxed the guard of those around her by conducting herself with such antics? It seemed likely. A predator under the guise of a rabbit.

The girl was someone Ryuu trusted, clearly. And even Ryuu's teacher, however uncomfortable he was with her, had been at ease enough to let the princess out of his sight, upon the Darkstrider's arrival. Despite the princess's reputation, he did not foresee Satsuki troubling the two other women together. And the girl had so brazenly torn off her mask, fearless of letting the princess learn her face. Satsuki could not treat her lightly. Someone with such confidence in her power was bound to be trouble-

"Uwaaaah! I took off my mask!"

"Yep," Ryuu supplied, giving her a consoling pat as Mako whirled away from the princess, flustered.

"They'll throw me out of the village-!"

"They haven't kicked you out yet, Mako. They won't."

"Oh! Actually, we should stop using my name, too! Never assume all is lost! Maybe Satsuki-hime-sama will forget it!"

"You just gave her your family name a minute ago, too."

"… UWAAAAH!! Mako is in a big pinch!"

"You're scaring the princess, friend. She probably thinks you're fixing to kill her to protect your identity."

"I have no reason to tell anyone of your name," Satsuki provided, very much prepared to react if attacked.

"I wouldn't hurt Satsuki-hime-sama," Mako sniffled, dropping to sit on the floor.

"See? Good, good. No one's fighting anyone in Sensei's shop tonight. Weapons down, let's all hold hands and be friends. On that note, are these new?" Ryuu interjected, inspecting a pair of knives in her hands.

"Ah, Ryuu-chan! You're getting better at that!" Mako chirped proudly, lifting her head. "But give them back before you get all attached to them or whatever!"

"It doesn't happen *that* quickly!" Ryuu laughed, dodging as Mako lunged for her. Ryuu swept into a bow. "If it will put your heart at ease, I'll set them down right here. Seriously, you remember what sensei said about carrying hidden weapons in his place?"

Mako nodded with a pout, and proceeded to procure various bladed implements from her person; she piled them upon the nightstand with the confiscated knives.

Satsuki watched the pile grow, eyebrow twitching. *She'll be unarmed. Supposedly.*

Mako was holding up a bag of multi-colored *konpeitou*, boasting that the hard candies doubled as caltrops. Ryuu gave her permission to keep them on her, provided she shared; the Darkstrider agreed happily, and the two shook on it with a clap.

She's either astronomically powerful… or an idiot.

Satsuki wouldn't wager on prying into the distinction, this evening.

Her hand by her pocket brushed over a soft lump of weight; a small, reassuring squeak issued at the touch. Out poked the head of a tiny, spectral blue mouse, and it ducked away again.

She walked up the hall from the bathroom to her room, pausing after she passed Ryuu's door. Ryuu had lent her a simple nightgown to wear over her bandages; Satsuki's own cloak, which had been lent to Ryuu post-transformation, was smeared with dirt and a considerable bit of the dragon girl's blood. Still Satsuki had kept it, folded with her own sweaty clothing beneath the armor that sat in the room she was being made to use for the night. The ornate breastplate, gauntlets, and boots she'd almost been reluctant to abandon even for the minutes she took to rinse her face and clean her teeth. But Ryuu was fixated on her Bakuzan alone. The blade presently lay in the sensei's care.

-"*Tell me this, thief. Am I your captive?"*

"*Hardly," Ryuu said, after finishing a mouthful of croquette. "I figure, we drop you off back in upper city tomorrow, safe and sound. Assuming you're ready to part with your sword, that is. Heck, if you're ready to do that, you can leave right now."*

"*I will not leave here without it."*

"*Then I guess you're here to stay, huh?" Ryuu jeered, holding her eyes seriously. Mako, oblivious, piled more croquettes onto Ryuu's empty plate, eyes shut over an open-mouth smile; she was singing something to herself with more enthusiasm than tune.*

"*How about this, princess. Let's have a little contest tomorrow - just you and me. Winner keeps the sword."*

"*You're challenging* me *to a swordfight?"*

"*Gods, no! I mean - I don't want to cut you to ribbons. I say we fight with our hands - if you know how, that is. I won't transform or anything."-*

Satsuki's jaw clenched.

-"*So if you win, you keep my sword. What do I stand to gain from playing your game?"*

"*You get a fair fight for your sword, for one. And I suppose if you win… you get a loyal dragon or something, now don't you?"-*

Would the thief fight fairly? But when would Satsuki meet with such a fine opportunity again?

She turned back, facing the door with eyes as steel.

"Ryuu," she called, pushing it open.

She blinked, processing the sight of Ryuu's shocked eyes, Mako's jolly grin, and two very bare bodies pressed comfortably together, upright on the bed with Ryuu's front at the Darkstrider's back.

Satsuki shut the door politely, and walked toward her room.

"Princess!" she heard, a moment before the door behind her opened again.

"I did not intend to interrupt," Satsuki said, hand resting on the doorknob already. Ryuu had found a towel to hide the essentials before following her out. "I… apologize. I assumed that since you shared the room, you would be dressed. I didn't realize you and the - the Darkstrider, are…" She grimaced. The thought of sleeping in the same room as one was an unsettling enough. But some would have considered laying with a Darkstrider akin to laying with a beast…

"We're not exactly, er, *together* like that, it's just - I'm not very hot."

Satsuki gave the shorter woman a blank look.

Ryuu shook her head. "I mean, my *body* doesn't keep warm. I don't produce heat as easily as most humans. So, Mako… lets me take some of hers, when I need it."

"… It was the same in the forest," Satsuki realized. Ryuu smirked.

"You got it. Heat is energy; energy is power. And if my blood's boiling, I can even turn that energy to mass… and assume my true shape."

"That one is your 'true' shape?" Satsuki wondered.

"It sounds cooler that way, at least," Ryuu shrugged. "But making the shift twice in one night burned a lot out of me. And it's too cold tonight for the ambient air to do me much good." She bit her lip, face slightly flushed. "Mako's someone I trust. And it's a lot easier on whoever's helping me if I can siphon the heat they generate slowly, over plenty of skin contact."

Satsuki's mind retraced the quick words of a thief holding the princess's own sword at her throat, and the odd demand that Satsuki dispel an ice arrow in her captor's shoulder. "What happens if you become too cold?" she asked slowly. She remembered Ryuu's breath over her shoulder, lacking the warmth to fog the air.

"That's not for my enemies to know, I'm afraid," Ryuu said, eyes flickering above an easy, crooked grin.

"Of course," Satsuki acquiesced. But she frowned. "I was surprised… the Darkstrider's body is like a human's, after all."

"You really expect any different? They generate their own magic instead of using their circuits to channel the world's energy. Maybe it's a frightening thought to palace folk, but that's the only physical difference, when it comes down to it. She's plenty human. More so than me. But you already knew that, didn't you, Princess?"

Satsuki didn't reply. Her eyes studied the faded burn below Ryuu's collarbone - the palace crest - and the scar on her shoulder, from Satsuki's own arrow of ice. Beneath the line of the towel on leanly muscled thighs, some of the scrapes that she'd suffered earlier were visible. Closed up and disappearing, when hours prior they'd been gushing. The girl was pale, as she'd been through much of her stay in the castle's dungeon, but health was already returning to her face.

"Like what you see?" Ryuu asked.

"Mind your tongue," Satsuki said, distasteful toward her humor. "You'll have all but fully recovered by morning, won't you?"

"And you won't. There's nothing I can do to help it," Ryuu said, smirking unapologetically. "But of course, if you'd like to give up the sword without a fight…"

"I will fight you," Satsuki said, "and I will best you, this time. Don't worry about that."

"Ah, so you're simply inspecting your soon-to-be possession with such fascination in your eyes. Good to know," Ryuu said.

"Good night, thief," Satsuki said dismissively.

"G'night," Ryuu said, dropping her towel and slinging it over her shoulder before turning to go back into her and Mankanshoku's room.

Childish… Satsuki scoffed and returned to hers, admittedly looking forward to rest, be though it would on a paltry bedroll.

A girl named 'Ryuuko,' Satsuki thought, playing with the sound of it in her mind. She thought of the scars, welts, and burns on an emaciated prisoner, and her eyes fell. A girl named Ryuuko, who showed no pain. A girl holding a piece of konpeitou away from a slobbering dog that tried to clamber over her, while a bewilderingly bubbly Darkstrider clung playfully to her arm, and the half-dressed sensei ate reheated soup in aloof silence, but for having at some point pilfered a few pieces of the confectionery for himself.

There was something refreshing, if nothing else, in seeing the thief surrounded by friends.

The princess sighed. *You're not making this any easier,* she chastised herself gently, and shut her eyes, resigned to slumber.

~ ~

Strange Respite

[img: http://orig06.deviantart.net/bd66/f/2017/086/7/e/ryuuaikuroufin_by_hinata0321-db3qp2b.png]

End

The half-dragon's body does not easily generate heat, but can draw body warmth rapidly from a human or other living being that trusts her.

A/N: Senketsu's appearance is loosely based on a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog (and a handful of other miscellaneous reference dogs)

The Tiger and Dragon

Chapter 4: The Tiger and Dragon

A duel for the Bakuzan becomes a clash of will, drawing out the full powers of the princess and the thief.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Four \ The Tiger and Dragon

Satsuki woke with the first sounds of others, but remained motionless for a time, in thought, before she moved.

Gingerly she pulled stained tape from her hands - the palms, scraped half-raw by dragon scales during her flight from the castle, were covered in cracked scabs. Flexing her fingers sent needling pain skittering, throbbing, from the extremities into her forearms. But the dribbling wounds were shallow; the damage would be an annoyance today, but would vanish with time. Well enough.

When she tapped experimentally into the flow of the world's power around her, it stirred in answer. She opened herself to it, and a wisp of it practically leapt to her innate circuits for the weaving: a small bit of Frost, the Arcanum of her strongest affinity, naturally sought to infuse her. It found her on memory, recognizing her like an old friend after the mere hours the mage had spent closed off from it. She nodded softly, appreciative.

Pale light stirred lazily upon her skin, and the air cooled about her hands as she willed it. Tiny, translucent droplets of frozen humidity drifted through the space, sparkling where they caught the light; they dissipated as she relinquished her miniscule diversion of the worldflow. Food and rest, and her body's capacity for channeling had been largely restored.

She clenched her fists, shutting her eyes with a steady breath as her fingers burned at the resulting pressure.

Today was a good day for a test of her limits. Assuming, of course, that her adversary did not disappoint.

Her hand closed on a roll of bandaging she'd been provided the night before.

Comfortable in her armor, hands neatly wrapped, she peered from her door down the hallway outside. She could see the kitchen area partially from here. The sensei sat at the table, half-dressed - bare above the waist - and penning a letter with narrow reading glasses perched over his nose.

Ryuu's door was ajar - the room probably empty. Satsuki walked quietly away from the kitchen area, pausing in the morning sunlight that filtered through a pair of double shouji doors a short way down the hall. The solid front door had sported a knob and hinges, common to the style of Middle City, but the sliding doors here were thin and decorated with a simple motif.

A garden lay beyond, bounded on three sides by the building and on one side by a fence. The enclosure was small, but enough to house a few benches, a walkway across a pond, and a scattered array of large stones.

Senketsu lay peacefully on a flat stone off the path; as she approached, he opened his eye and licked his chops sluggishly. His tail began to flit side to side, his rump giving a wiggle, but he did not lift his head. The dark eye he had fixed on her was reddish at the

heart, ringed by a narrow, almost orange iris - unnerving in its focus, however personable the strange beast seemed.

"Oh - morning, Princess." That was Ryuu's voice. A shifting sound, and the woman's head became visible above the edge of the largest rock in the garden, blinking down at Satsuki.

"What are you up to? Sunbathing?"

Ryuu shrugged. "You should try it sometime. It's relaxing," she said, and was punctuated by a low 'woof' from the dog, as if in agreement. "There's space up here, if you want."

Satsuki shook her head. "Ryuu…" she said, pausing only briefly. "When we fight, I fully intend to subjugate you, as per the right of my Kiryuuin blood."

"Good luck with that. Me - I'm not interested in seeing your world and mine intersect any more than they already have, so once I win that sword off you, I'll send you on your way. The palace is big and slow enough it'll take time for any large-scale search and rescue operation to be mounted. You'll be right back home in the lap of luxury before any kind of chaos breaks out."

"The Crown knows what you are now; your fight won't end when I'm returned home. But if you return with me, as my servant…"

"Then what? You'd protect me?" Ryuu chuckled. "See, I take things one step at a time. For now, I just have to defeat you; then I'll worry about what's next. I'll figure out tomorrow's fight tomorrow."

"If you're determined to fight, I won't hold back."

"Alrighty."

"Prepare yourself."

Ryuu's lip twitched. She looked away. "People like you… really do rub me the wrong way."

"I'm sorry my personality fails to suit my abductor's tastes. If it's any consolation, people like you appall me."

"What kinda' person is that?"

"There's a measure of vulgarity in being so undriven and carefree." Satsuki turned to walk back toward the house, eyes cold. "I am ready whenever you are. If you wish to spend your last morning of freedom basking in the sun, I suppose I shan't disturb you."

The princess stopped by the door, giving one backward glance as a thought occurred to her. *She hasn't seen sunlight in at least two weeks…*

Eyes shut, she stepped inside.

A girl who knows no real urgency or ambition… She truly doesn't know of fear. Does this pissant perceive the world around her as a mere playground? Life, a game she plays on a different level, removed from danger or consequence?

Narrow-minded. Small. I won't lose to such a creature as this.

I have a destiny to fulfill. This beast was placed in my path for a reason. The powers she would have squandered as a petty criminal… shall become a weapon under my command.

It was still early when they left the shop. The streets of middle city were sparsely populated as their group made their way - Ryuu wearing a jacket with its hood up, Mako sporting common clothes, and the sensei in work clothes with the wrapped sword on his back. Senketsu alternately kept to Ryuu's heels, ventured out about the street and structures, approached people with a gregarious knack for attracting ear scratches, and circled back at a trot, tongue perpetually lolling to one side of his mouth or the other, and shaggy fur bouncing in waves with his steps. The princess wore a hooded cloak, keeping inconspicuously close to the others. Curiously, the

sensei also carried the red Tenkantsuujou in lieu of his own cane, though Ryuu at least claimed she did not intend to use it.

Satsuki watched the relative neatness of the business district decompose as they made down a main street in the direction of Lower City. Maintained if modest houses and shops gradually gave way to the jumbling disorder of small, crowded gray houses and dilapidated hovels, only some of which were occupied. On the other side of the road Hakuryou River ran white, its flow quick through a canal, stretching from the outskirts of the city to a distant stone archway that bounded the commoner districts from that of the noblesse.

Their destination lay at the boundary of Middle and Lower City - a boundary rarely traversed in either direction. The road had tapered off, dirt of an ancient path overrun with erosion, grass, and stones. While the scarred lands and shantytown inhabited by scattered Darkstriders rested quietly on the horizon, the party's immediate area was a field of dirt and yellowed grass, bounded loosely by smatterings of broken stone bricks and worn, splintered wood. This was a borderland that had known not the remotest semblance of civilization in recent times.

No one would take notice of a duel unfolding here. Ryuu slipped off and discarded her jacket, revealing a button-down shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows; she walked out ahead of the rest, stretching out her arms with a yawn as she strode into the open space.

"Let's get to it, shall we?"

Satsuki raised a brow. The others were settling; Mako, who had slipped away at some point shortly into their walk, had materialized just as abruptly, seating herself on a stone, and Senketsu went to her side, eye shutting appreciatively as she scratched his ears. Satsuki wondered if the beast could behave himself when his master came to harm. Sighing, she walked into the field.

Even when she stood across from Ryuu, the woman hardly seemed alert, shoulders slouched and eyes half-hidden by drooping lids.

"How do we plan to do this?" Satsuki queried.

"Let's say, hm… first to surrender, or to stay down for a count of ten, loses. Oh, and you can turn tail and run if you'd like, but if you do you ain't gettin' the sword. Obviously." She yawned. "Sound good?"

Satsuki scowled internally, but nodded. The sensei, from a short way off, raised his hand.

Understanding, the princess squared up in a low stance. Ryuu raised her fists lethargically, swaying like someone who might be overturned by the breeze.

"The terms are agreed. This shall be a duel for the greatsword Bakuzan! Combatants, ensure a fair fight is shown to whatever gods may pay heed to your battlefield!" Mikisugi called, in line with the land's custom. "Ready!"

The furrow of Satsuki's brow deepened at a protracted, eyelid-wrinkling yawn from her foe.

"Begin!"

Ryuu shoved toward her - and sprawled to the ground, foot caught on a stone.

Satsuki nearly faltered in disbelief before she noticed the control in the fall, as Ryuu rolled forward over her shoulder and sprang to throw a punch.

The move was explosive; as Satsuki dodged to the side, Ryuu overshot her by several meters. Then Ryuu gathered her weight, launched herself from one foot - and spun three quick times in midair before flinging out a kick. Satsuki caught the blow on a gauntlet,

armor rattling, teeth gritting as she caught a glint in the younger woman's now-sharp eyes.

Then she was bowled back. She rolled, sprang from her hands, and sailed onto her feet again; Ryuu, in her shadow, was cartwheeling forward and leaping after her, spinning into an axe kick. Satsuki blocked from low, arms crossed above her; she was fully aware, as her body shook with the weight of the strike, that without her gauntlet her arm may have fractured. She wondered only briefly at what this said of the strength of Ryuu's bones, before grabbing her ankle and shifting to hurl her away.

On landing, Ryuu tore tirelessly into another offensive; Satsuki took care to favor dodging to blocking the strikes, her mien stern as the smiling Ryuu sought to overwhelm her.

"You didn't fall for it," Ryuu sniggered in the midst of her attacks; air rushed audibly about her fists. "I figured not, but it was worth a try-!"

"*TORA NO YOUSOU!!* "

The princess snarled the words with her first attack, hair dancing in her wake as she wove inside Ryuu's guard to slam the heel of a palm into her breastbone.

[ASPECT OF THE TIGER]

Now Ryuu slid back, heels screeching several meters through the dirt. Her look was at first annoyed; then she straightened, eyes growing, trying to back away before two knuckles lit into her cheek with a sharp thunk. Blood splattered to the dirt.

She reeled, her gaze wavering in focus. When Satsuki approached, the speed of her movement jumped disorientingly when the aura, the Aspect of the Tiger, flared about her; it seemed to abate, and then shone bright with each of her strikes as Satsuki gave a shout of

battle, swinging with open hands. Ryuu tried to block a feint, and was struck hard on the left side of her face, then the right. Ryuu backpedaled, but failed to defend as Satsuki cut forward and thrust both palms out, striking Ryuu's stomach and chest to blow her off her feet.

She rose with a grunt, staggering, as Satsuki drew a cool breath and stood straight, one palm still extended.

"Th-the hell is that?" Ryuu growled, coughing.

"Ryuu-chan, you're losing!" Mako cried helpfully. Senketsu gave a high-pitched bark, on his feet with ears pinned back; though he didn't leave the Darkstrider's side, his throat off gave a steady rumble, eye trained on the princess.

"It's as I thought," Satsuki mused, watching Ryuu shake. "It's not merely *effective* on you; it's crippling, isn't it?"

"The *Dragon*," Mikisugi observed, "is said to be the Kiryuuin's sacred aspect, called upon to manifest dormant powers of the Kiryuuin blood. Supposedly, channeling it burns so much life force it would be impossible for someone weak of spirit to use for even a moment. It's considered the birthright of the Kiryuuin line, and wielding it proficiently is proof of one's right to ascend the throne. But this Aspect of the Tiger is something I've not heard of before…"

"That's because it's no traditional technique," Satsuki said crisply. "It is my own invention, effected by inverting the flow of power used to assume the Aspect of the Dragon. You, Ryuu, are serving as a perfect subject to evaluate its efficacy."

"Inverting it?" Ryuu wiped sweat from her brow; her forearm came away dripping, though her body felt sickly cold. "You don't mean…"

"In essence, the 'Tiger' technique is an *Anti-Dragon* technique!"

Satsuki cut down the distance between them in one cold heartbeat. Ryuu swore, dodging clumsily as a palm snapped past her skull, but the hand sank into her hair. Satsuki pulled her forward, the aura flaring in concert with the strike of the knee she cracked into Ryuu's gut, causing her to wheeze. She released her, and Ryuu couldn't fall to her knees before the princess coiled and spun, launching a backwards roundhouse kick squarely into her jaw.

The image of the stern-faced princess delivering the strike was blasted out in a flash of white in Ryuu's eyes, accompanying the harsh impact resounding in her ears.

So… graceful…?!

The blow shook the air. Satsuki saw Ryuu's eyes dim before the girl went sprawling away, sailing a clean ten meters before crashing awkwardly to the dirt. After rolling twice she rose, almost flailing upright, only to fall flat on her side, and remain there. A low groan croaked into the air.

Mikisugi stuttered once, and began to count. "O-one! Two… !"

Senketsu whined. Mako's brow quivered.

Satsuki, jaw set, strode toward her downed foe.

"Seven! Eigh-! Oi, princess!" the sensei warned. "What do you think you're doing?!"

With her hands full of the neck of Ryuu's shirt, Satsuki hefted the younger woman up. "A power equal in magnitude to the sacred aspect, but able to nullify it. It's done quite the number on that unruly spirit of yours, hasn't it?"

When she set the dazed Ryuu on her feet, she stayed upright, albeit swaying. Satsuki wasted no time in drawing back and smashing a fist into her nose.

Ryuu gave a cry, finding her body hitting the ground. Her heart was beating slowly; her body shook, and her eyes didn't blink. She hardly felt the blood streaked across her face. She was cold. Her head was a swamp of pressure, and her muscles could have melted, could have been made of water and she'd only just realized it.

"Stop this!" Mikisugi shouted. "Are you trying to kill her?!"

"Kill her?" Satsuki asked. "If she's ready to surrender to me, no further harm will come to her." She turned back to the thief shivering in the dirt. "And to think I had wondered at the name 'Ryuuko' - a name you concealed so desperately, you could only have understood its magnitude. But if you were some prophesied one meant to fulfill a grand destiny, you would weather my onslaught with your own strength."

Ryuu growled as an armor boot pressed down on her skull, pinning her cheek to the earth. "A-are you seriously - aspiring to b-become a dragon master, like the Kiryuuin of old…?"

"I wonder…" Satsuki lifted her boot and stomped suddenly, causing her to yelp. Ryuu couldn't fight as the princess moved to her side, grasping her arms and pulling them back; in a moment Ryuu knelt immobile, a bark of pain escaping her as Satsuki's boot planted itself between her shoulder blades, jarring her lungs and straining her arms. Ryuu's head hung, thick strands of blood swinging from her nose and gaping mouth.

"Ryuu-chan!" Mako screeched, starting forward. Satsuki saw the sensei's hand twitch onto the weapon at his belt, ice in his eyes.

"You, complicit in crimes against the Crown, shall NOT interfere!" Satsuki boomed, the imperious thunder of her voice bringing them to falter. "Stand back and watch, lowly curs! Consider yourselves fortunate. You and the gods alone shall bear witness to the moment Kiryuuin Satsuki tamed a dragon!"

Power seemed to emanate from the princess, rays of it stretching out behind her, dazzling as the sun. And in concordance with it, light began to float from Ryuu's skin, pooling in places before curling up around her like radiant mist; it grew swifter, and curling wisps of light spiraled and darted fluidly between the thief and the princess. Satsuki felt unquestionably the enormous weight of the power settling into her grasp - the bond to be sealed. Her eyes grew intently, her bangs and braid whipping in the wind.

"Ryuuko, possessor of the blood of dragons! You belong to ME!"

"*Hell* no!"

The light dissipated in a quick wave at Ryuu's words, the air settling with a low crackle of power.

Satsuki blinked. The pact…

Had been disrupted.

Ryuu yowled as the princess wrenched unforgivingly back on her arms. The light shifted around them again, the vicinity darkening against the radiance of the princess.

"You belong to me-!"

"A pox on that!" The light cut out again.

Satsuki's teeth ground as she focused again.

"You will acknowledge your master!"

"Ain't gonna happen!"

"By the right of my blood, I claim-!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Your power is mine!"

"You can kindly go sard yourself!"

"Dragon Ryuuko!!"

"KIRYUUIN SATSUKI!!"

The two were panting for breath, eyes masked in shadow. Satsuki's lip curled; there was venom on her words when she spoke again.

"Such insolence…"

Ryuu felt one arm released - and was flung around by the other, sent tumbling harshly over the earth.

Satsuki watched the girl's back shake as Ryuu planted a hand on the ground, trying to push up. She didn't rise far, and her back remained to Satsuki as the princess raised a hand, and a cold pulsation hit the air. She opened herself to the Wordlflow, as if by releasing a spiritual valve, and drew an extraordinary sum of power to a plane of her jurisdiction. Chill wind now shadowed her words when she spoke, the crackling of ice rumbling forbiddingly, like a faraway roar.

"If you refuse to serve me, I not only have no use of you; I don't know what trouble you may later bring about. I am Kiryuuin Satsuki, first princess of the eternal kingdom of Honnouji, and heir to the Radiant Dynasty's throne! You think that once aware of it, I could allow a power such as yours to go unchecked? *Do you imbeciles think this is a game* ?!"

At her bidding a spear of ice solidified high in the air above, longer than Satsuki was tall. The translucent shard glinted in the morning sun, angled toward the prone Ryuu. The great power of her channeling not only danced wildly upon Satsuki's skin, but now shone from her eyes, setting luminous blue irises aflame with fury, chilled with conviction - precise lethality.

"Dragons *live* to be tamed - and those that will not be tamed shall PERISH!"

Her hand dropped, clenching before her with a crack of activated power. Cries sounded from the sidelines. The frozen lance snapped downward in a flash of speed, and struck with a boom, flinging dirt and debris high into the air.

When the dust settled, a figure was standing beside the solid lance, shoulders slouched.

"*Oi, oi, oi, oi, oi*…" Her shoulders shook with a chuckle; her voice was somehow rough while smooth, unusually low. "Such a pure, unsullied bloodlust… truly is remarkable."

Her hand swung back at her side. When her fist passed through the pillar of ice, its crystalline surface cracked before shattering outward, the entire thing effectively vaporized under the force.

Ryuu lifted her head and cocked it to the side, irises dyed an eerie crimson. Strange energy was thickening in the air around her, rising like flames from her skin; steam rolled slowly from her nostrils and parted lips as she looked down her nose, thrilled eyes locked onto her adversary. "You're not like the soldiers who kill 'cause they're ordered to, the knights who kill for the glory of the kill, or the nobles who kill just because they can kill. You're a particular sort of brute, aren't you, my good princess? I see now. You're *different* from the rest…"

Satsuki scowled, opting for a reply of the physical sort. "*Tora no Yousou!* "

The aura sparked to spur her dash forward, and flared as she sent a row of straightened fingers into flesh above Ryuu's breast. The energy about Ryuu shrank and flickered in response; it dimmed almost completely when Satsuki sank an uppercut into her stomach with a thudding crack, lifting Ryuu's heels from the earth. The light, sitting close to Ryuu's skin, was just beginning to sputter with rekindling wildness when the princess spun to deliver a vicious knifehand to the side of her neck, and what remained of Ryuu's aura

vanished with a smooth sharpness, suppressed, cut down like a flame scattered by a roaring wind.

Ryuu swayed - and she threw back her head with a roar as the aura surged up around her, brilliantly defiant, its intensity howling and beating back the air.

When Satsuki ducked aside from a strike of Ryuu's hand, she felt heat prickling uncomfortably at her cheek. As another swing came, Satsuki grabbed her arm and turned, leveraging Ryuu over her shoulder - but the smaller woman somehow maneuvered so that a foot, rather than her back, struck down. She straightened as Satsuki released her arm, and the princess lunged again, only for Ryuu to twirl outside her strike, slipping behind her back.

Satsuki found two arms, like bars of iron, locking strongly around her waist - her feet leaving the earth, as Ryuu lifted her and dropped back - and her head rang as her shoulders and the base of her neck plowed into the ground.

Ryuu released her and staggered away; Satsuki, a beat slower, scrambled a bit shakily to her feet. "What is this…?"

From the edge of the field, a dog's long, low howl poured into the air.

"Here we go," Mikisugi muttered.

"I don't need any outside source of heat… if someone can make my blood churn the way it is now!" Ryuu yelled, baring sharp teeth in a malicious, belligerent grin.

[OUTRAGE]

Her voice seared with wrath as she rushed forward, movements practically bursting with vigor. "*You?* Tame me, slay me?! Don't write

me off as prey you can snuff out whenever you damned well please, Kiryuuin Satsuki!"

A backhand swing, though blocked, threw Satsuki back. Satsuki bounced and recovered her footing, arms sweeping back. "Foolish!" she shouted, as mist gathered and crystallized around her. It ruptured into a thousand spinning shards of glass that sped toward her foe.

Ryuu threw back her hands and loosed an inhuman roar of contempt - the sound itself concussive, cracking the earth at Ryuu's feet as it was unleashed. The blast scattered Satsuki's projectiles, hacking brutishly through the intricate weave of the magic that propelled them. "Is this the all there is to the 'onslaught' I need to weather? Self-righteous wretch!"

Ryuu shifted her weight, and vanished in a blur, dust spinning upward where she'd been. Satsuki leaned back, eyes wide but focused as fingers splayed like claws scorched past her breastplate, flames rolling out along the path of the strike. A second strike ensued, and flames crackled in the wake of Ryuu's evaded hand - lashing a trio of gouges shallowly across Satsuki's armor and cloak. When Ryuu leapt and spun with the move, turning away from her, Satsuki remembered in a split second to defend - and her gauntlets sparked under a powerful slam that knocked her airborne and crushed the wind from her lungs, sending her spinning back.

Satsuki skillfully restructured the flow of her magic circuits to conjure another affinity, channeling an arcanum distinct from Frost. She held out her hands as if to grasp an invisible weapon, and used her momentum to lash it around like a blade.

Light sprang to shape in Satsuki's hands for only an instant - and struck into a surprised Ryuu's blocking forearm, burning it. Satsuki had sensed the blade of light striking bone before it was deflected. Holy arcana were effective enough on her, then.

"Make no mistake, Ryuu," Satsuki said, hands rising to what would have been a ready stance, for one wielding a sword. "Your life matters not to me. I have no need to become a dragon *tamer* so long as I prove powerful enough to be a dragon *slayer* . From here on out, I strike only to kill."

Ryuu sneered. Hands fisted at her sides opened, fingers splaying, to send twin spurts of flame rolling toward the earth. "Good to know."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "… You're not a Scorch mage."

Ryuu swung an arm back, singeing the earth with a line of flame as a crooked grin curled mirthfully on her lips, savage. "That, I am not."

They rushed forward. An ephemeral blade of light arced and slashed artfully against blazing strikes, scattering and materializing decisively. Thrown back, Ryuu snarled combatively, eyes glinting dark, twin red embers that trailed jagged light as she moved. She threw some twelve or sixteen strikes in furious succession, each one colliding with Holy arcana in a crash of brilliant, sparking energy. So the warriors danced, dodging and countering, neither able to secure the upper hand.

"So what if I were the one called on by the prophecy?" Ryuu challenged, leaning outside a lunge and ducking under a slash. "Will you earn points with your dear mother for vanquishing me here?" She launched into another barrage of attacks, getting the princess to backpedal, taking the surrendered ground and driving for more. "Surely someone boasting conviction like yours isn't a cozy lapdog of the corrupt queen!"

"My reasons for fighting would surpass the comprehension of vulgar, piddling swine! For all your power, you lack ambition!" Satsuki's palm met an arcing spray of flame, dissipating it in a wave. "Perhaps fate had offered you some grand destiny - but if my destiny is more powerful than yours, you WILL crumble here before me!"

A mighty overhead swing, and the blade of holy light took form in Satsuki's dropping hands to bear down on Ryuu, who fell to one knee as she caught it in palms that channeled her aura into jets of flame. Her back strained, her now-prominent fangs grinding in a snarl as Satsuki fought to force her down.

"I will not falter before powers of myth. Kiryuuin Satsuki will heed neither legends nor prophecies of old! Be it a lord descended from the heavens or the vilest demon to claw its way forth from the pits of hell, I will crush underfoot ANYTHING that DARES stand in the path of my ambition!!"

"*Who's* standin' in your path?!" Ryuu twisted, directing the attack aside so that the blade only caught her arm as it dropped. She lunged in, driving her other fist into Satsuki's cheek just as a retaliatory elbow lashed into Ryuu's temple. Ryuu rolled, Satsuki staggered, and they locked eyes and sprang together again, trading blows at a furious speed.

"I hide my name 'cause I ain't want any trouble. I didn't ask for this name, and I don't want anything to do with your curst prophecies! Get it?!" Ryuu cried, as their hands came together, fingers interlocking, and she drove the princess back with overwhelming strength. "The kingdom could burn, or your monarchy could burn, and I wouldn't give a shit!!"

The Aspect of the Tiger roared to life, and Satsuki caught traction, pushing Ryuu back several steps before Ryuu ground down to brace herself to a halt. Never had Satsuki subjected her body to maintaining an Aspect for a duration of several seconds, but her pain-widened eyes were livid, her forehead lined with rage. "Petty! Small! That's what you are!"

Their foreheads rammed together, and the air and earth shuddered around them as they held, struggling against each other.

"Someone with the power to stand against me living devoid of the drive to do a thing in this deplorable world - I cannot tolerate it!!"

They shoved apart, and charged forward at once. Ryuu spun to launch a vigorous backhand, and Satsuki mirrored the move. The dragon's blood blazed; the tiger's ferocity shone bright.

"What you can or can't *tolerate* is none of my concern! *KIRYUUIN SATSUKIIIIIII!* "

"*DRAGON RYUUKOOOOO!* "

FWHAM!!

The noise was incredible, as their forearms met. An immediate shockwave buffeted the air before the space around them, twisting, seemed to crush momentarily, powerfully inward - and exploded out again, sending dust and debris sailing, the battered earth tearing itself in great hunks away from their feet for a tremendous radius from where they stood.

In a minute, there was silence.

"Wh-what…?" Mikisugi wondered, lowering his arms. He'd been ducking down, prepared to shield himself, but he was now crouched behind the old wreckage of a stone building, probably a short way from the field.

"I moved us to safety," Mako said beside him, causing him to start. Senketsu stood at her heels, his look solemn. "You didn't want to get tossed around in that shockwave like some random extra, did you?"

"Like a *what* ?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is whether Ryuu-chan is alright," she said, blurring toward the roof of the structure.

He shook his head, as a piece of broken wood cracked belatedly to the earth nearby.

When he and the hound circled around the barrier, the sensei's jaw dropped. "Gods above… did you see this?"

The field was splayed with jagged fractures and strewn debris, freshly hewn slabs of earth and stone heaped in a haphazard addition upon the fringe of rubble at its edge. At the center of the devastation, in a wide dip impressed upon the earth, two stood with their forearms locked; one supported a gauntlet riddled with cracks, the armor seeming ready to fall away. The other was bruised purple and red, fingers twitching tensely.

Ryuu shivered once, and sank heavily to her knees, arms falling limp at her sides.

"M… madwoman," Satsuki panted, incredulous, face slick with streaks of sweat. She straightened, reeled a few steps back, and caught balance again. Her knees shook, but her pride did not permit her to fall, though her gauntlet finally crumbled in a few pieces to the dirt. She gripped her arm, brow knitting sternly. The Aspect of the Tiger had not shielded it from bruising, maybe fracturing. "What impels you…?"

She refused to believe Ryuu could be aimless. An aimless beast, or even someone with meager aspirations, would have been obliterated by Satsuki's power for certain.

"Princess…" Ryuu said. "I'm going to take your lofty ambitions… and drag them through the muck. You say I can't comprehend them… but I don't need to understand them to do this, now do I?"

Ryuu met her eyes coldly, and opened her mouth, drawing air deeply into her lungs.

Light gathered in her throat.

Satsuki started, finding her knees were stiff.

Bloodlust… for bloodlust.

Topple whatever enemy stands immediately before you. Is that what drives 'Ryuu'?

"What a joke… you wild beast."

The blast of flame seared from Ryuu's throat, racing along the earth with blinding intensity, glinting orange and white against Satsuki's cold eyes.

A great rectangular shield, its lower edge lined with spikes, plunged from the sky a meter before Satsuki to root itself with a crash. It was taller by far than the average man, wide enough to shield several. And on its front, glinting in dancing cinders and splattering flame, was the crest of the Enforcers.

"The hell?" Ryuu cried, oblivious to the figure that lunged for her back, a gargantuan hand stretching out.

She was slapped forward - a thumb at her ribcage, one finger over her right shoulder, three curled around her left - and lost her wind sharply as Gamagoori swatted her to the ground, his arm like a tree trunk planted on her back.

"Thief Ryuu - stand down, in the name of the throne," the giant said seriously, while the rumble of hooves sounded close by.

"Satsuki-hime!" Sanageyama called, his horse sailing over a short ledge into the field across from them. He released a tether from his steed to a riderless white mare; understanding, Satsuki brought two fingers to her lips to whistle sharply, and the mount hastened toward its master, no longer requiring the knight's guidance.

"The Bakuzan is secured!" Inumuta declared, briefly hoisting up the wrapped sword from the back of a horse he shared with Jakuzure; the songstress was somehow rattling out an intricate flute tune, even while their horse galloped toward the princess.

"S-sensei?!" Ryuu rasped, eyes widening. Mikisugi had been holding that sword. Suddenly the blade itself was insignificant. "You lousy… !" She was pushing up against Gamagoori's hand, much to his disbelief; he closed his other arm around her and took her down

again, pinning her with his weight, but she strained furiously. "If you bastards have hurt them, I *swear*… !"

Gamagoori's eyes rounded in a moment of bewilderment as the woman began to budge him and rise, but he kept his hold. "Gravity!" he grunted, bronze skin glinting briefly with the spell - and Ryuu crashed down beneath him with a smothered profanity, no longer able to move an inch.

"Good work!" Satsuki was seated proudly upon her steed; Sanageyama, on his own warhorse, was smirking at his lady's side. When Houka and Nonon drew level, Satsuki took the offered sword by the hilt, drawing it with her good arm from the burlap wrap and from its sheathe. The great obsidian blade lurched around, leveled down toward Ryuu.

"Miscreant! I deem you worthy of breathing another day. But when next we cross paths, Bakuzan and I will carve open your fate once and for all! Prepare yourself!"

She raised the sword skyward. "Circle! Let us return home!"

"Aye!" four voices chorused. Satsuki's horse reared, and she and the other three made at a gallop away from the field. Only once they were distant did the hulking Enforcer rise.

"Think about the good fortune of this pardon, and don't try to follow us," he advised, walking to his shield. With one backward glower, and a new spell - Fortify, no doubt - shimmering subtly over his form, he freed the great shield from the earth, and leapt several dozen meters across the field before making after the others in a steady sprint.

Ryuu rose shakily, fuming. "Yeah, you just wait!" she yelled after them. "You're good at runnin' away, huh, Princess?! We meet again, I drive that sword through your pompous heart-!"

"Ryuu!" Mikisugi hissed. "Treason! Do *not* openly scream *treason* at the kingdom's princess! They saw my face!"

"Sensei! You're all okay?"

"No harm," he said, nodding toward the others as they approached, sheepish. "That Muddler… was something else. I'm sorry. The spell cracked me before I realized what was happening. I think I handed them the sword."

Ryuu swore. A Muddler getting that quickly through someone as experienced as the sensei was frightening, indeed. "What matters is that you're all right," Ryuu said, scratching a whining Senketsu's ears with a shaking hand. He seemed to give her a gravelly 'wuff' of reprimand. "Yeah, I know. Reckless, right…?"

"So," Mikisugi said pointedly, "I don't suppose you recall my warning about the fearsomeness of the Junpakko?"

"Yeah, she's sarden tough. But I handled her fine enough, didn't I?" she persisted, smearing the back of a hand absentmindedly at blood tickling her face. She sniffed wetly, tasting iron in the back of her throat. "Met her blow for blow."

"Ryuu, you're a mess."

"I'm upright, yeah?" she said, but as if on cue, began to sway. She laughed airily, and her voice sounded odd to her. "How often will I even get a chance to fight this hard…?" *What an… incredible human…*

"And if your speech patterns are any indication, you're cooling down, I take it?"

Dark spots blotted on her vision. She lost sense of Senketsu's fur under her hand, while he whined in concern.

"You overexerted yourself," a distant voice gurgled, echoing around her. "And the damage from before is catching up to you. To fight so hard on Outrage alone…"

"Ryuu-chan!"

Mikisugi caught his pupil as she slumped, eyes rolled back in her skull just before the lids dropped. "Good grief," he muttered, pressing a hand to her cheek. Cold as ice. But her pulse was a slow, steady thump in her chest.

He lifted her - some fifty or sixty kilograms of dead weight. "Fool. We just got you back…" And carrying a pupil away from a duel, beaten to within an inch of her life, seemed a task for a master warrior, not a master thief. He winced at the sight of the field, which indeed looked like it had seen outright war.

What two warriors alone caused a scene like this…? He wouldn't have been able to stop their fight if he'd tried. He looked down at Ryuu again.

I hope you'd forgive me for giving up on the sword; it was either play along, or start a fight I probably wouldn't win. It's not a lie that the Muddler really did almost *crack my defense… But it's better that the princess and her people are out of our hair, for now.*

He caught a look in the Darkstrider's round, moist eyes, and frowned. "She…" he started with some hesitance. "She'll be fine, with some rest. Don't… worry."

"I want to stay with her."

He held her eyes for a moment, and relented with a sigh. "Come along, then."

A bit of rest in a warm place, and she'll be good as new soon enough. And in the end, we got more information about the

Junpakko's abilities than we could have hoped for. I hate to say… that's the only reason I suggested it to begin with.

You did alright, Ryuu. You made her show her full strength, and that's something.

The full strength of Princess Kiryuuin Satsuki, the Pure White Tiger… Unfortunately, it's more than any of the rebel forces she's annihilated thus far can claim to have demanded.

~ ~

The Tiger and Dragon

[img: http://orig12.deviantart.net/16cb/f/2017/119/b/5/nononhoukapairfulldesat_by_hinata0321-db7lh8v.png]

End

Extreme emotions can contribute to the half-dragon's heat energy. In this way, a state of Outrage (, gekirin, 'imperial wrath') is incurred when, in the explosive uptrend of energy associated with achieving Flashpoint, transformation is suppressed to instead concentrate tremendous power in human form.

Rumors of Demise

Chapter 5: Rumors of Demise

The two awaken after their duel, the princess in the castle, the thief in Middle City. Ryuu confronts Boss Takarada in the hope of getting to the bottom of her betrayal by the guild.

Hi again! Slightly shorter chapter this time around, but it seemed like the most logical place to break things up. You can expect the next one relatively soon!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Five \ Rumors of Demise

Ryuu dreamt a common dream.

Among those dreams that tended to recur, it was not her most common; for competition, there came with delightful frequency the scenario in which she frolicked in some lair conjured of her mind's pleasing, rolling in piles of priceless treasures and gold.

The dream that visited her in her present deep sleep, however, was one more rooted in reality.

Are you hurt?

Blinking groggily up at the humanchild, wounded, scared, confused. Circling hurriedly away, wary, as the child circles toward her side.

You're bleeding! That thing… that's from a crossbow, isn't it?

As if in response to the reminder, the pain radiates, throbbing, from her side. There *is* something sticking into it, pinching sickeningly between two ribs, something she hadn't noticed in her escape but has now slowed her to a crawl, leaving her tail dragging in the dirt. All she knew was to get away from those people, and to protect the egg…

I'll get my papa! He's a healer, kind of. He's probably never healed something like you before, but I'm sure he can help!

Help? Mewling softly - a warbling trill from the throat, the sound cracking through tensely bared fangs. She doesn't know how to speak in this shape, and humans become dangerous when they see her this way. But her other shape is too soft, too weak for the pain.

Shrinking warily under a pat to her scaly snout. A steady, wide-eyed growl, the rumbling threat almost as senseless as it is pitiful. Why isn't the humanchild frightened? Is it another trap?

I'll be right back, okay? Don't worry!

But if someone can make it stop hurting…

Ryuuko's eyelids fluttered open as the masked child's image faded. She stared for a minute into the hearth, where a fire crackled gently. Senketsu was huddled against her front, his dark fur soft, chest rising and falling gently as he snored; another body was curled against her back, a hand on her shoulder, breath steady on the back of her neck. It was nice. Between the two of them, she would have felt warm and safe anywhere.

-"*You have to hide what you are, don't you? I kind of get it. We have to hide, too."*

"*Why's that?"*

"*The monarchy… doesn't like my people, I guess." A laugh, untroubled. "Actually, most of the city doesn't!"-*

"Mako?" she croaked.

"Mmn?" the Darkstrider answered groggily.

Ryuu smiled. "Thanks for stickin' around."

The brunette giggled, eyes shut. "I'm glad you're back, you big silly."

In a moment Ryuu sobered, the light of the flames flickering from her eyes. "Things… might get complicated, soon. The Crown knows about me, you know." She tried to chuckle. "All that, and I don't even have the damned sword to show for it." *But if everyone's in one piece… well enough, for now.*

"What are you going to do?"

"I guess… I'll see what happens. But it could get dangerous." Ryuu's brow furrowed. Should she leave the city after all? There was one place she could probably go, however it soured her stomach to think of it…

"If it'll be dangerous, I'd better stick to you like glue so you keep out of trouble."

"Mako…?" Ryuu said, surprised in spite of herself.

"You'd do the same for me. You say you don't care about the kingdom or anyone else, but I know you're not a person like that, Ryuuko-chan."

For a minute Ryuu was silent. Then she sat up, crept past Senketsu to the free space just before the hearth, and lay on her stomach before pushing herself up with her hands. She winced, finding her

right forearm didn't enjoy the exertion, but simply tucked that hand behind her back.

"Ryuu-chan?" Mako giggled, watching as she lowered and pushed herself up. After several repetitions sweat budded on her skin, from the warmth of the fire nearby. Senketsu quirked his ears, having rolled from his side onto his stomach to watch.

It's about time to wake up.

A smile tugged at her lips.

I was sloppy. When I do fight, it's almost always against people weaker than me.

I don't know what's coming, but if I face that Kiryuuin Satsuki again, I'll have her think twice about how easy it is to slay a dragon.

And if my friends, few as they are, want to stick with me… I've got to give it my all.

When the five had departed from the border of Lower City, they had continued at a gallop until they reached a small square of piddling market stalls. They passed a dry fountain and slowed to come to rest in the shadow of a stone archway, hidden from the midday sun. Commoners had looked curiously at them as their party passed: three flawlessly groomed horses, the riders brightly dressed mages and soldiers decked out in emblems and fine steel, accompanied by a towering man, in a full suit of armor, effortlessly keeping an impossible pace beside them on foot. Sanageyama gave a cool look to those in the market whose gazes lingered; remembering themselves, they looked hurriedly away, going about their business.

"Good tracking," the princess said to Inumuta, jaw tense.

"Of course, m'lady," he said, reaching out as a spectral mouse wriggled from a pocket of Satsuki's cloak. The wispy rodent scurried

up to her shoulder and leapt between their horses, to the summoner's outstretched hand, with a happy squeak. Inumuta gave it a pat with one finger, and it vanished in a puff of bluegreen smoke. His eyes, however, stayed on the Kiryuuin.

"Are you well, Princess?" Nonon inquired.

Satsuki's eyes stayed forward, intently unfocused on the space before her, as she lifted the sheathed Bakuzan at her side. Her arm drooped short of rising to horizontal. "Gamagoori," she said shortly. "Take this."

As the greatsword passed into his hands, she uttered a curt "Thank you" and slumped against her horse.

"M'lady!"

"Satsuki-hime!"

Her steady breath cracked, letting a gasp of pain escape her. Her body burned with fatigue, muscles blistered and torn with the overuse of Aspects, but her teeth were clenched fiercely.

She matched me as a human. The dragon form… would almost certainly have overwhelmed me…

With a hanging fist clenched too tightly in her horse's rein, breath short and harsh, she had pinned her eyes shut. It hurt. It burned. The pain was choking, squeezing her throat, surging with the beat of a racing heart. Her teeth ground, and loosened again.

She dreamt of combat, and of a girl, a beast, who faced her down like a mirror to her rage. The princess's cool fury, in her adversary laid loudly bare.

She awoke some time later, unsure of when her consciousness had deserted her. Even the press of her body against the luxurious bed brought a tight, steady ache to her back and limbs. She blinked

focusing eyes, catching sight of her zweihander resting safely on a table at the foot of the bed.

At a voice nearby, she stiffened.

"The Circle tells me you fought the dragonchild. Quite valiantly, I'm sure…"

"Mother," Satsuki rasped, trying to rise but finding her head heavy. The queen placed a hand on her chest, shushing to placate her.

"Rest," she instructed, and Satsuki relaxed.

Slender fingers played attentively at Satsuki's jawline as the queen looked down at her with crimson eyes, from a seat beside the bed. Satsuki turned her head away slightly, aware that beneath the blanket, she was covered perhaps only in a scant few bandages.

"Just look at the shape of you…" Ragyou drawled.

"Forgive me," Satsuki said, eyes shut. "Her powers surpassed my expectations, and I failed to best her."

"It was not unanticipated, truly," Ragyou said, while Satsuki's lip twitched at the feigned kindness. The queen smirked at the reaction, red eyes flashing with something quite unlike condolence or concern. "And now look at you - powerless as a newborn lamb. It's curious, you see… I took the liberty of tasting your magic before you woke."

Satsuki blinked nondescriptly, not turning her head. A taste - that was what the Queen called her use of Detriment arcana, in less than detrimental doses, to survey Satsuki's circuits. It was not an uncommon use of the Drain spell - but due to Ragyou's compatibility with her daughter's Bloodborne powers, and the intimate familiarity she'd had years to foster with the taste of Satsuki's magic, she could dissect the princess's fatigue, the fine, innately tangled scars of her magical exertion, more precisely than a common mage could have hoped to.

"This fresh, heaviest footprint of power… it's unlike the Aspect of the Dragon."

"I improvised," Satsuki said. "I modified the Aspect, as it was ineffective on her."

"To adapt the technique so quickly!" Ragyou remarked, a hand at her lips. "You really *are* clever, my dear. And it's just like you, even on the heels of your abduction, to waste no time at all in attempting to claim her for your own."

"She will be a precious asset of the Crown," Satsuki said. "To claim her in Your Majesty's name would be an immeasurable honor, Okaa-sama."

"If that is so, I suppose I shall leave you to your fun… The hunting of this Ryuu will remain your task, for now. You seek to test yourself against her, yes? What an age we live in! That the Kiryuuin heir could prove her mettle by hunting and taming a dragon, dilute of blood though she may be…"

Satsuki looked toward her as she rose. The queen tipped her head back and made toward the door in lilting strides, dress sweeping about her heels.

"But should you seek success in breaking the dragonchild… you'd do well to best her in her *true* shape, I'm afraid."

Satsuki's eyes flickered.

-"*I say we fight with our hands - if you know how, that is. I won't transform or anything.*"-

She shut her eyes a moment. *Bloody pest.*

Ragyou studied her with a smile. "We can discuss further once you're well, and you can tell me what you've learned about this Ryuu. You've been through quite the ordeal. For now, I'm simply

happy my daughter is safe and sound," Ragyou sighed. She opened the door and left Satsuki alone.

Some three minutes later, a polite knock came to the door.

"Enter," Satsuki said, and four heads poked through the doorway, arranged by height. Four of the greatest warriors and battlemages the kingdom had to offer, faces determinedly hard, eyes tinged with apprehension.

"What did I do to attract such worrywarts?" Satsuki asked flatly. "I don't recall recruiting you for your concern."

Four smiles arose at this, and the corners of the princess's lips just managed to quirk upward in return.

"So he thinks I'm dead."

"The entire guild does, Ryuu. They gave you a memorial service and everything."

"How was that, anyway? Any of the tough guys cry?"

"Focus, will you?"

"Aw, come on!"

"It was astounding! No one cried at all!" he declared, arms crossed, eyes shut as he turned up his nose.

"Tell the truth!"

"Refined as I am, I might have shed a single tear," he conceded, turning away to posture with a hand clutched melodramatically to his chest. The man's tone at this point was outright theatrical, and the young woman gave some choice vocabulary for the eventual sniggering he broke into. "Fine, fine! I'll tell you later who all cried, if it means that much. But yes - the guild considers you dead, if not

forever lost to us, going mad in the castle dungeons or what have you."

The sensei and disciple were shadows in an alley beside the Dancing Pig; it was late afternoon, a peak hour of traffic for the club their guild called home. Music and chatter could be heard from inside.

In catching up with Mikisugi on the latest goings-on, Ryuu had confirmed the belief of her demise numerous times already, but hearing it just now sent a cackle from her throat - some part nerves, mostly anticipation. The sensei had snuck a glance inside minutes ago, confirming the boss's presence.

"Are you sure this is how you want to start this? I could sit him down with the rest of the council and talk to him…" He was not overtly discouraging, however; having learned that Ryuu had been sold out and should by all rights have lost her life - and seeing as her future was the one resting in the balance - he would support her in her right to approach this as she saw fit. His eyes were chilled with distaste, after seeing the boss laughing and carrying on with his cohorts. It had been as common a sight as ever for the last weeks, certainly, but if Mikisugi's student was to be trusted - and he felt she was - the sight of it was presently unsettling, given that by all indications the boss had sought to have one of his own disposed of, and then had the nerve to deliver a short eulogy at her memorial service.

Ryuu didn't waver any longer. "This is the best way. We sit down and talk, my word against his, who'll the council believe - the boss, or a troublemaker sour about failing her redemption job? No, I think getting the piss scared out of him will do wonders for our Boss," she sneered. "Loosen up, old man."

"Who are you calling old?"

She blocked a play smack that came toward her head, a smile dancing in her eyes. "Let's drop in for a hello, shall we?" she said,

walking from the alley. Side by side, they approached the steps to the main entrance.

"Don't kill anyone," Mikisugi reminded her at a mutter.

A thief standing watch by the doorway began to nod at their approach before giving Ryuu a double take. Paying him no heed, the sensei stepped forward to shove open the hall's sturdy doors.

"Boss Takarada!" he announced, voice clear and level, projecting to cut cleanly through the din and chatter of the hall. "You have a visitor!"

The lively racket of the patrons ceased as all eyes honed in on Mikisugi - and in short order, the smaller figure striding past him, and the shit-eating grin plastered crookedly on her lips.

"Takarada Kaneo!" she exclaimed, each syllable deliberate, eyes belying the sarcasm of her opening arms as she set an unhurried course across the room. "So sorry to report back late. Did you miss me?"

In the space of a moment, his face had twisted from confidence to astonishment, eyes pressing roundly at their edges. A wine glass slipped from slackening fingers, meeting his table rather loudly in the abrupt quiet of the bar.

His mouth worked for a moment against a paling face, and he pointed forward. "D-detain her!" he hissed at the lackeys beside him, voice high.

Two scrambled to their feet and rushed forward. Ryuu leveled the Tenkantsuujou at one as it popped several meters out, catching him about the temple with a curt 'thump'. It had resumed normal size before he hit the ground, and as his partner looked toward him Ryuu hopped forward with disarming calm - clearing ten meters to crack a front kick into the standing man's chest. He was thrown back, flipped by a table at the backs of his legs before crashing to the wall beside

a shrieking Takarada, and dropping face-first, senseless, to the floor. Ryuu landed with a thumb hooked in her belt loop, her staff resting over her shoulder.

"I'll have you know," she said pertly, continuing to walk, "I'm in a right cross mood about now. Could you imagine why?"

"Ryuu!" It was a rough voice in which Tsumugu said her name. He emerged from the crowd and barred her path, arms coiled to poise his fists at the height of his shoulders, rolled-up sleeves of a collared shirt tight around his biceps. He was skillful enough metalworker, but average among the thieves in terms of stealth; in the guild he more often specialized in providing muscle on jobs that needed it.

Ryuu, however, wasn't presently impressed. "Kinagase. You're gonna stop me? I invite you to try, but keep in mind I'll actually be fighting back, this time."

The sturdy man's eyes darted from her to their Sensei, who stood calmly back. Indecision flickered in his expression. "I'm… I'm glad you're alive. But you're still out of line. I don't know what's happened, but you failed the job; you're no hand of the guild any longer. You must understand that. If you wanna take it out on the Boss like some snot-nosed punk, you can bet your arse I'll at least try to stop you."

"What's happened," Ryuu said, glowering past him, "is that our honorable boss has been loose with the Code." She raised her voice. "So imagine my surprise, when the castle's Enforcers had a nice, big welcoming party set up to meet me! When the entire guard knew I was coming, and had some dozens of court mages trained on me within minutes of a flawless infiltration! Now imagine the bearing that a stay in the imperial dungeons has had on my opinion of that filthy crook behind you!"

"That's…" Tsumugu cringed, uncertain. "That can't be true."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Takarada yammered.

Ryuu was closer in a blur; instinctively, Tsumugu struck out. She ducked under his first swing; at his second, she grasped his arm in both hands, swung him around, and hurled him across the bar, her strength bewildering to the onlookers.

Takarada's cane came toward Ryuu's skull while she was facing away - and the weapon was caught in her right hand, cracked in two by a chop of her left. He dropped his half of the ruined cane from a trembling hand, pinning himself to the wall, head shaking left and right so fast his monocle went sailing.

"A-Aikurou-san, do something…"

"Oh, but Sensei's not gonna help you when *you've* been pissing on the Code, see?" Ryuu said with a smile. "Fess up. You leaked my job, didn't you? You did one of the worst things a respectable boss can do."

His brow was knitted, helpless. His eyes mustered up something apologetic as she shook his head again. "… They gave me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"Don't tell me…"

He shrugged sheepishly, hands up. "Cash money, honey. Three million rin, for one loose cannon-?"

Ryuu's hand in his collar and cravat lifted him to his toes. "Tell me why I shouldn't rip out your sarden *kneecaps* and stuff 'em up yer-,"

"Ryuu!" Mikisugi hissed.

She scowled. "… Explain what you did, so everyone can hear."

"I… was offered money for the thief called Ryuu. I set her up on a job to the castle, and gave the contact her description and agenda."

"Who was this contact?"

"I… well…"

"What's more important - your power, or your kneecaps stayin' where nature intends them?"

"I really ain't know who it was!" He shook his head again. "Woman, average height, soft voice - wore a cloak, I couldn't see her face. Paid gold rin - the whole sum, like it was nothing! I was scared. You don't smack that kind of money into someone's hands upfront unless you got ways to find them. Someone even *having* that kind of money to toss around for bribes reeks of bad news! Of course I gave 'em the best info I could! I don't know why *you're* worth so bloody much, and I don't know how they knew who works for me. Way I sees it, it was either you or the guild. Is that really any choice?"

Ryuu's lip curled. She wasn't any part of the leadership, sure, but it was simple to see that if that was true, the guild was compromised, and he had kept it quiet. Disposing of whatever threat he saw in Ryuu had only been an added bonus to the gold he'd gotten for it.

So this woman, whoever she was, passed the intel along to that slimebag Enforcer… but someone was after me before I even showed off what I am? That doesn't make sense!

She opened her mouth - and gave a start as light streamed from the window, its glare transforming the room into a stark array of multicolored radiance and sprawling shadows.

Mikisugi swore. At the door, the thief who'd been on guard pushed clumsily inside, blinking out tears with a grimace. "Citywide! It's an event!"

But the room was mostly frozen, as it set in. The light sent something unpleasant down Ryuu's spine; once, when she had been outdoors when such a summons was issued, she'd looked at the source - at that distance, a pinprick starburst of light high in the castle - directly. It had been like a shard of the sun sitting closer than it had any right to, and it had drilled shrill foreboding into her bones. But in the

moments her eyes were blinded exploding patterns of twisting light had ordered themselves impossibly; her mind's eye had been shattered, seized and overtaken, and transformed into a tempestuous spiral of foreign things.

For a few seconds, the taste of utter helplessness had tightened the back of her throat. The anxiety didn't pass nearly as quickly as her momentary blindness had. In fact, it had left some mark on her, rarely though it was felt - a relentless twinge of insecurity that needled her every time that accursed light rained upon her world, her city rooftops and streets. It was maddening. She hated it - a few times had cursed it, when she was alone.

What did others feel? She didn't know if people experienced the light the same, or differently. She didn't know whether or not she wanted people to feel the way she did, dry-mouthed and jelly-legged, shaken at a moment's notice, like she'd taken a fist straight to the nose that was so fast she'd never dodge it any time it felt like blindsiding her. How *did* it feel to others? She wanted to know, sometimes. She bet, or hoped, other people wanted to know, too.

No one ever asked.

Some frigid moments later - just moments, probably, since the thief on guard had staggered in - the light mercifully receded.

She met the Sensei's eyes, and then looked back to Takarada, releasing him; he stumbled and caught himself, quickly backing along the wall away from her. That's right - she'd been doing something, but no longer.

The young woman swallowed, gathering her voice and making it gruff. "We can wrap up our chat later, then," she said, satisfied enough with how it came out, and turned toward the door. She was cold. It was sarden cold, when a minute ago her blood might have been popping like hungry flames.

The silent daze of the hall lifted behind her, and other thieves deserted their tables and drinks. Mikisugi kept to Ryuu's side, and Tsumugu kept to his, as the bar's inhabitants filed for the exit. Every citizen of the capital's Middle City would be doing the same thing - pouring quietly onto the streets, converging toward the great square at the heart of the capital. So the mass of humanity would trickle steadily along, like waters inspired unanimously, at some powerful bidding, to flow uphill.

Tardiness was not tolerated in responding to a summons of the queen.

~ ~

Rumors of Demise

[img: http://orig02.deviantart.net/0530/f/2017/150/0/6/ryuu_frolicking_by_hinata0321-dbb0qz2.png]

End

The Kiryuuin lineage is said to have been tied to dragons since ancient times, and the Kiryuuin blood, a home to powers too immense for the ordinary human body to bear. A Bloodborne Art passed down through the royal family, the ***Aspect of the Dragon*** *(* , 'ryuu no yousou' *) can be channeled to manifest these dormant powers, enhancing the user's physical abilities.*

Rather than draw upon the Worldflow, the Aspect is sustained by the wielder's life force itself, and as such is typically drawn upon sparingly in battle.

Celebration of Peace

Chapter 6: Celebration of Peace

Queen Ragyou declares it a 'Celebration of Peace,' a grand spectacle for all the capital's citizens to see.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Six \ Celebration of Peace

Satsuki flung shard after shard of ice into the targets - each finer and faster than the last, until the projectiles were crossing thirty meters in the blink of an eye, cracking into bull's-eyes and slicing through their predecessors. She drew back, and a phantasmal bow of frost unfurled smoothly in her grasp; the arrow she drew into existence and loosed from it arced along the earth, trailing dust, and punched cleanly through her selected target, blowing it back and into the air as its wooden mounting burst free of the earth.

The bow shattered into dozens of shards, spinning at the princess's back before she swept her arms forward; these projectiles spiraled out above the airborne target and plummeted in a ring, with a snap of speed, skewering it from all sides. They glinted and burst in a blast of cold, whipping Satsuki's raven bangs and braid back as she looked coldly on. Pieces of the target pattered to the field.

She drew a controlled breath, straightening.

"Quick on the recovery, I see. I'd expect no less, but…"

She turned her head to the newcomer. "Sir Uzu. I do hope you shan't intend to chide me for neglecting my rest."

The knight shook his head, walking from a stone archway into the practice yard. He wore his formal gear, a uniform consisting of an armor cuirass over a light-colored robe, a thick belt about the waist, dark pants, and steel gauntlets and boots. A red-orange band kept green hair from his eyes, and a similar scarf trailed behind him from his neck. "The kind of woman you are - if you can move, you can fight. The 'should' and 'shouldn't' of it, that's yours to decide." He picked up a wad of paint-crusted straw that had been woven into the target, inspecting it. "If you're going to keep wearing out your circuits, I suppose I ought to hold off on challenging you to any duels. Though I did just get the Toad to refresh the enchantment on my blade," he said, sporting a cocky grin. "I'll be ready, when you are."

"Oho? You suspect you would best me as I am now?"

"I'd come closer than I'm used to, and it would trip me up for the next time. I'll wait 'til you're back up to snuff."

Satsuki didn't deny it, as she watched fragments of crystalline ice about the yard sublime slowly into sparklets of light. Returning to the world's flow, as the warrior mage relinquished them. Weaving magic was tiring, more so given her already fatigued circuits; she knew that the more corporeal exertion of training with the Bakuzan just now would be folly to subject herself to.

"Where are Inumuta and Jakuzure?" she questioned.

"They're having tea with Iori, probably talking philosophy or whatever the magically inclined do in their free time. And most of the knights are dull company, so I'm bored out of my boots."

"Get yourself a squire to mentor, if you have so much free time."

He shook his head. "My place is commanding troops, not training brats…"

"Like the brat you were, six years ago?"

He ducked his head with a chortle. "I should hope not for one as troublesome as I was to my knight-master." His look grew contemplative. "Besides, if I had some starry-eyed knight-in-training looking up to me, I'd probably want to start conducting myself like a respectable knight. That would mean no more challenging my princess to contests every other day, and that's simply not acceptable at this point in my life," he said with a shrug, eyes twinkling.

"You'll have your spar soon enough," Satsuki assured him, though she couldn't share in his humor. She knew the reasons he didn't seek to take on an apprentice in the present age were more various than he purported.

He chuckled. "I probably shouldn't be scrapping with anyone just now, either way. Not sure why, but the Queen's Own are supposed to muster here in a bit…"

The knight trailed off as the soft daylight was eclipsed.

It was smooth; for one moment, it might have been the subtle shift of sunlight as cloud cover moved clear. But it continued to brighten, scorching rays stretching dazzlingly from a castle balcony and across the city, as if to swallow the horizons.

The two couldn't see the source; it was blocked by a wall bounding the yard. In the darkness of the shadow that fell over them, Sanageyama's visage had grown sober, the lightheartedness of moments prior nowhere to be found.

As she took in the radiant summons, Satsuki's look was much the same.

Ryuuko had seen it before. Sometimes the events were months apart, sometimes years. But she never forgot the sight of a light that

made one feel as if no place in the world was safe.

She, Mikisugi, and Tsumugu stood together in the crowd as the great ambling river of humanity, through numerous tributaries, pooled itself about the perimeter of the square and stagnated where it filled. Ryuu's eyes were cold in the shadows of the low-resting hood of her cloak, her shoulders slouched, hands in her pockets as she waited with the rest of them.

The expansive, brick-paved square marked a threshold of Middle City and Upper; it was presently ringed with Enforcers, a few of whom she had the displeasure of recognizing. On the Middle City half of the square the lawmen stood at a regular interval with blank eyes trained on the crowd, hands folded behind their straight backs, and canes hanging at their belts.

The upper side housed rows upon rows of pale gray seating that extended up and back from the Square's edge. As the elevation climbed in the direction of Upper City, the large area needed for the main floor of the Square had been partially hewn from the land to be flat, with the nobles' seating arrayed naturally on an upward slope; attendance for the higher class was optional, but they never failed to turn out in great number, awaiting the events eagerly, something foul in their eyes as they speculated amongst themselves. Central behind them stood a grand stone archway and deck, and above the archway rose a white statue, a story tall.

From the lower half of the square, the slender, crowned figure with upraised arms towered as the utmost prominence in view, but for the distantly looming spires and the castle itself. The founder of the Radiant Dynasty, this warrior chiseled in grand armor and sweeping robes had vanquished crisis and, in its aftermath, forged the embattled kingdoms of a war-torn land into one. It was beneath the hero's weathered stone eyes that the event in store would unfurl.

Ryuu's head didn't move as her gaze lowered from the statue, leveling instead on the one who walked proudly out onto the balcony that jutted from the archway. The queen struck an imposing figure

and held a bearing of confidence, effortless in her finesse; her gown, close-fitting and sheer, was adorned with a motif of white cloth roses that could have blossomed from the fabric itself. A set of sleek platinum jewelry adorned her ears, wrist, and neck, and her smiling lips were painted neatly red.

When Ryuu looked directly into the crimson orbs above her sharp nose, she looked down quickly, glowering into the pavement at her feet. She knew the monarch would never pick her out as the thief who'd snatched her daughter from the castle, not at some hundred meters, much less in the swamp of thousands of faces packing into the lower square. But something about those eyes made her skin crawl.

I've got wings, she reminded herself, the thought a steadying one. She was stronger than the rest.

I ever need to, I'm strong enough to fly away from here.

She raised her eyes again.

Another figure had come to the queen's side, as the monarch descended to a stately stone chair. Ryuu's lip wrinkled only briefly in an impulse of annoyance at the sight of her. The dark-haired princess stood at her mother's side, shoulders straight, postured much as the Enforcers were below. Chin up, her stone gaze presided coolly over the masses before her.

Eventually the lower square was silent, dutifully motionless. Opposite them, the citizens of Upper City had taken their seats, but carried on sociably as they waited for the event to commence.

The plaza center had been set up with a long horizontal crossbeam, several meters up, supported every ten strides or so by a pair of sturdy, intersecting wooden struts. What would it be this time, Ryuu wondered. The queen loved to leave the noble spectators in suspense for their fun.

The figure on the throne lifted a hand; within moments, silence had obediently replaced the quiet chattering, as the queen commanded the attention of Upper and Middle City alike.

Her smile was gentle. "Our good citizens. We hope this summons finds you well. These past months have not proven the kindest to our kingdom; for all the castle's radiance, and this city's efforts to preserve your haven, treacherous things, unsightly things, at times begin to rear their heads."

A line of people snaked into the plaza, some dozen and a half chaperoned by a few armed Enforcers. The shambling figures were bound by their wrists to a long chain, blindfolded, most of them gaunt and pale. Some, already bloody and bruised. They were led to stand beneath the wooden structure.

"As you know, the radicals that plague our lands grow bold when left too long unchecked. In the vapid indolence of the purposeless, they creep from the woodwork, they lash out in their irrationality, and they delude themselves into surmising their violence can shake a dynasty that has reigned supreme in this land for one thousand years. But as your protectors, we will not falter in the face of such deplorable behavior."

A line of knights marched onto the field from a tunnel on the Upper side of the square, their pace uniform. A few excited whispers dared to stir among the noble spectators, as the soldiers lined up some twenty meters from the line of inmates. Their numbers were equal.

"At such times as these, when the disease of senseless rebellion begins to infect the weak-willed among us… a celebration of *peace* is in order."

Each knight bore a javelin in hand.

The queen snapped her fingers.

The prisoners gave sounds of surprise as cords of dark magic sprang from their shackles, the tethers leaping to furl and coil rapidly about the horizontal beam above. At once they were wrenched meters upward by the wrists, legs flailing as they were locked to the structure. In the twilight, magical lights, blue-green, illuminated the space above each one. Once they all hung by their wrists, the blindfold of each prisoner snapped away in quick succession, revealing horrified eyes to the crowds.

"The celebration will proceed as follows," the queen declared, arms outstretched, her voice climbing grandiosely in volume. "The selected members of the Queen's Own are the most skillful knights in the service of our kingdom - upholders of our cherished peace. The individuals across from them are charged with suspected rebel affiliation. For crimes against the Crown, I hereby sentence them to death."

She spoke over the thrilled roar of the Upper City crowd; men and women in fine clothes were clapping, stamping their feet, cheering jovially for the promise of entertainment.

"Each knight is assigned to the insurgent hanging across from him. A generous prize will be awarded to the champion who can land the most javelin strikes *without* killing his target!"

The prisoners were screaming, struggling, their protests drowned in the Upper City's cheers. Squiers were filing out behind the knights, towing along carts laden with light spears.

"I'm not a rebel!" a woman screeched. "I told you, I'm not! Let me go! *Let me go!!* "

Ryuu's teeth ground. A steadying hand rested on her shoulder, squeezing, but her blood silently simmered. She glowered into the frenzied, writhing mass of so-called nobility. They were hollering cheers, laughing with each other, leering at the 'rebels,' or shaking hands.

Her stomach soured, air rushing out of her nose. Bets. They were placing *bets* .

A contest of pain.

And these are the sorts of people who would name me *a monster…*

The man across from Sanageyama didn't wail or cry in panic, like most of the others. He was beaten and tired, but something burned calmly in his eyes as he hung by his wrists. He didn't look at the knight with fear.

"*Seriously?* " a senior knight groaned beside him; no one more than a few steps beyond could have heard, for the noise of cheers and trumpets and drums that puttered a merry tune. "This game is rigged! Look at the one you've got. They've probably been feeding him and everything! Piss," he muttered, "and look at those eyes! I'd bet money that one actually *is* a rebel."

Sanageyama barely heard him. The middle-aged man he'd been assigned was lanky, but did look sturdy beside most of the emaciated prisoners, with a broad build and an angular jaw. Withered cords of muscle stood out in his arms, as he lacked so much as a healthy trace of fat. Almost certainly, he was someone who had once been strong.

"Yeah - Sanageyama's got a strong-looking mark, lucky punk!" another knight complained, working his shoulder. "It'll be easy to make that one last a while. Me, I get a bony-arse little girl! Look at her!" He sneered at his skeletal target, who struggled fruitlessly at her bonds. "She's fixin' to cry!"

"If you graze her, I wonder if she'll piss herself?" another knight laughed. "Maybe you'll get extra points!"

"Graze her? Hell, she might drop dead before I get a chance to make her bleed."

Sanageyama smiled and agreed dully, lifting his head as the queen spoke again.

"The one I grant the honor of commencing today's celebration is a favorite of many of you. He left behind the ways of a scoundrel, and took up arms in service of the Crown. A reformed man, who now defends our kingdom with valor - truly, an exemplary tale!"

The green-haired knight's eyes were trained on the cobblestones. Pins and needles filled his hand, as he loosened his grip on the javelin's shaft.

"Sir Sanageyama Uzu! Step forward!"

The roar of the crowd pounded in his ears. He stepped up obediently to a neat chalk line that had been laid down for the knights. Turning back to face the queen, he took a breath and pumped a fist above him, ushering a swell of cheers from the nobility above.

"My knight," Kiryuuin Ragyou said, holding his eyes. "Show the degenerate across from you of proper suffering, for his crimes."

She waved a hand.

He lowered his head, crossing a fist over his heart with a solid thud. The crowd grew hushed as he straightened.

Sanageyama hefted his javelin in hand as he turned, cocking his arm back. Stepping powerfully onto the line, he gave a shout of war, and let fly.

The arena was silent, but for the punch of the spear squarely through the strong prisoner's heart.

Satsuki's eyes were hard, on the back of Sanageyama's skull. She looked again to the hanging prisoner as the man sputtered briefly, wetness crackling on his breath and blood staining his beard.

Spurting crimson escaped from about the spear lodged through his chest, and he shuddered once, growing rigid in shock or pain.

Then his form went slack, his chin dropped onto his chest, and the magical light above him distorted and popped, vanishing in a wisp of blue embers.

A scowl contorted the knight's face. Eyes dark, looking past the admirative awe of nearby squires, he turned to face his queen again. Then, as he lifted his head proudly, a vicious smile wrested up his lips.

"Forgive me, my queen!" he called, his voice malevolent as he crossed his fist over his heart once more. "So fiercely did I thirst to deliver *justice* in your name upon these *miserable* swine… my arm demanded of its own accord that I strike true."

He bowed his head, and the crowd roared with a mixture of reactions - the squeals of young noblewomen, the curses of those who had placed good money on him, or the innumerable cheers over a thrilling start to the bloodshed. The knights at Sanageyama's sides jeered, pleased with their improved odds and amused to no end over what they quite believed to be remarkably sour luck merely disguised as overzealousness. Indeed, what poor luck must have befallen the excitable young knight, for his aim to slip in such a way as to deliver a lethal blow? He had at least gracefully hidden his shame, to save face.

The queen simply nodded, her visage coldly thoughtful. At the wave of her hand Sanageyama departed from the plaza, head low. The next knight's name was declared, and cheers rose up, and the event continued as the vaunted Sir Sanageyama Uzu skulked back into the entry tunnel.

The gruesome spectacle carried on; the knights took turns hurling their javelins for the better part of an hour before the wavering indicator light above the last wretched captive was extinguished.

The queen declared a holiday in Upper City the following day, so the noblesse, already drunk on the bloodshed of their lessers, were free to make merry in revelry amongst themselves well into the night.

Ryuu stared into the wooden ceiling of her room, a hand nestling idly into Senketsu's thick coat. The hound lay silently across her thighs.

It was her first time returning to her own house since all this nonsense had begun. The hearth - however slim the pickings when she'd been so eagerly looking for a place to call hers, she would never have chosen a dwelling without a hearth - it was unlit despite the cold of the night setting in, leaving her and her companion lethargic. Many would be drinking in the Dancing Pig, she knew, drowning their senses, numbing their nerves, and badmouthing the monarchy as far as they dared; Mikisugi was probably off talking with Takarada and the council, about her case and about what had transpired.

She hardly considered herself squeamish; it wasn't something like that. But she hadn't wanted to be around Mikisugi, or the guild, or much of anyone at the moment.

Her hand mussed in Senketsu's fur. Well - Senketsu was something special. His presence was one she not only didn't mind, but needed, at times like these. Even in the silence, his steady weight kept her head from spinning with all manner of things she didn't want to contemplate.

"Humans… are bloody awful, huh?"

The dog stretched across her lap turned his head to rest on her stomach, giving a soft sound as he looked up at her with a knowing red eye.

-"*The kingdom could burn, or your monarchy could burn, and I wouldn't give a shit!*"-

She scowled.

She wondered for not the first time whether the event had been called in part in answer to her antics at the castle. Some piece of her had wondered it with every thud or scrape of the javelins on the prisoners' bodies, every scream, every indicator magelight going dark in time with their eyes. But there was no use wondering, since she'd never know the answer.

Senketsu stood up in the darkness, stretching with a shiver, pink tongue curling in a protracted yawn. This done, he walked around to nudge his nose into her cheek. She grumbled. She'd already fed him, so she didn't mind sitting here until sunup. If she dropped into a low-energy stupor, she could last plenty long without food either way.

The dog gave a deep and booming bark, startling her onto her side. He sat and twitched his tail side to side, looking on innocuously when she glared back at him.

"Fine!" she cried. Her heart was pounding from the scare; she used the wakefulness to clamber to her feet, and left the room to fetch some wood for the hearth. Arms full, she paused at a dusty shelf at the side of the storage room.

Crouched before the hearth, she mustered up enough energy to spit a puff of flame onto the kindling, mildly satisfied with herself at the humble feat.

When the fire burned strong, and she'd drunk a ladle of water, and a plate left only with crumbs was deposited at her side - then she sat with an old biwa and plectrum in her hands. Senketsu settled beside her. She let the silence and the rumble of the hearth envelop them for some time longer before, at length, she began to play.

Sanageyama entered the meeting room dressed in fine if relatively casual wear. He exchanged looks with the only other present and lowered his head apologetically, eyes shut.

"Your brother knights of the Queen's Own won't let you hear the end of it, I presume," Satsuki said, a strong eyebrow quirked.

"'Course not," he said gruffly, sitting. His teeth worried the inner side of his lip for a moment, bitter; his fingers knitted loosely, arms propped on his knees. "It made it easier to slip away from the party, at least…"

"So?" the princess said, an edge to her words. "What happened? If I didn't know better, I might almost suspect you were showing defiance toward our queen."

He looked up at her again, cringing. After a moment he buckled, averting his gaze. "… They say in the old kingdom, knighthood was about glory, honor…"

"Quit that," Satsuki berated, even if gently by her standards. "You know speaking of the old kingdom is forbidden." She looked to the tall window of the study, as the sun set red on the holiday that had been declared. "This world knows and shall know only one kingdom - that which was forged by the courageous Kiryuuin of old."

"Aye," he agreed dutifully, his demeanor grim but resolute. "That which is ruled by our righteous and fair Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou."

"Long may she reign," Satsuki said, and her knight-commander nodded.

"Long may she reign."

~ ~

Celebration of Peace

End

[img: http://orig13.deviantart.net/c190/f/2017/158/e/1/grandarcanafin_by_hinata0321-dbbx8vl.png]

A Primer on the Arcane Arts, Part I:

Ten fundamental magics exist within the Worldflow that courses through the realm, not unlike white light woven of a spectrum of distinguishable colors. These Grand Arcana are divided into five domains, with each domain comprised of two Arcana inverse in nature. Spiritual circuits within the human body can absorb, shape, and unleash the arcana of their affinity in the form of specific spells.

A mage's circuits generally possess a strongest affinity, and in rare cases two or even three; while training arcana within the affinity proves fruitful, attempting to wield an arcanum poorly compatible with one's circuits will yield limited success, regardless of invested effort.

Grand Arcana and example spells (text version)

Physical: Augment (Fortify, Swift, Endure) - Detriment (Drain, Enfeeble, Rigor)

Mental: Lucid (Sharpen, Steady, Focus) - Muddle (Daze, Sway, Conceal)

Seishi ( ): Replenish (Heal, Awaken, Refresh) - Ravage (Spark, Scorch, Frost)

Nature: Order (Trace, Restore, Time) - Chaos (Rend, Space, Gravity)

Spirit: Holy (Lux, Bless, Purify, Banish) - Dark (Shadow, Pain, Corrupt, Summon)

Junketsu

Chapter 7: Junketsu

When the queen's suspicions come to a head, Satsuki must prove her loyalty or abandon her plans.

For quick reference if you want it, the Grand Arcana diagram from the end of last chapter is also provided here (for a post including the text version) and here (for just the image).

Have I ever mentioned how much I hate writing Satsuki anywhere near Ragyou she should just be far away from her at all times Here we go!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Seven \ Junketsu

Satsuki was silent at dinner that evening. As servants swept to clear away her salad plate and arrange the main course in its place, she gazed coldly into the table, swirling the red wine in her glass with a calmly swaying hand. The steak on the intricately decorated blue porcelain dish set before her was rare, glistening with moisture and a glaze of sauce, garnished with herbs and citrus wedges. Her mother the queen would have nothing less than such luxurious fare served at her great dining table.

"Are you well, Satsuki dear? Your food will go cold. You barely even touched your greens."

The princess looked up; her mother sat across the long table from her. Between them, at a medial point along the table's side, the High Sorceress reached ever-daintily for a platter of exotic fruit, picking through before selecting one that caught her fancy.

Satsuki set down her glass, eyes hard. "How to say this, your majesty, Mother…" She raised her head. "In the last several years, I and those you have granted to my command have waged a long and arduous campaign against the rebel forces that crop up throughout your lands - a campaign I do believe has proven fruitful in keeping the insurgents at bay."

Nui's eyes lilted from one side of the table to the other as they spoke; munching on a nibble of fruit, she primly cut a small snippet of her steak, popping it from her fork into her lips.

"Yes," Queen Ragyou agreed, "Superfluous as the efforts are, you are a fine soldier, Satsuki, and you serve my kingdom well."

Satsuki's gaze was level. "But it hasn't been enough, has it?"

There was silence in the dining hall, but for the playing of a pianist, and the High Sorceress's chewing, as the Princess and Queen held eyes. Ragyou's expression was somehow thoughtful, in the crisp light of the central chandelier above and the glow of the candles that set the table.

There was all too often something narcissistic in Ragyou's eyes, when she looked at her daughter; that *something* was not so much angered, but disappointed, when the princess strayed from the queen's vision for her.

"Whatever do you mean, my dearest daughter?"

Satsuki folded her hands in her lap, straightening. "If I may speak candidly, my queen. I fear that executing random prisoners will only further incite the insurgents to action, and breed rebel sympathizers as close as the capital itself."

"Do you mock me, Satsuki?"

The princess lowered her gaze immediately, breaking eye contact. She had let a trace of anger slip into her voice; she knew she had overstepped. Her tone was all apologies now, all deference, in as much as it ever varied from her chilled demeanor. "Of course not, my queen. Your wisdom is boundless, and I have yet much to learn. I merely… sought to offer what little council I might be able."

I know the way these people think.

Satsuki heard the queen stand, heard the steady clack of heels as the monarch drew leisurely across the dining room. The princess knew better than to raise her eyes before permitted. She had overstepped, certainly. She should not have held eyes with the queen for so many moments, as if to challenge her judgment - particularly not so soon after Sanageyama's stunt the previous day.

She suspected she would spend the coming evening humoring her mother's whims to make amends. If it allayed suspicion, that much she could easily endure. She shut her eyes as the queen stopped at her back.

A smooth, icy caress ran forward and back along Satsuki's jawline.

When the hand began to sink into her hair, the princess knew something was amiss a split-second before her head was slammed into the table.

The heavy mahogany of the dining table shook briefly; a candle was overturned. Nui flicked a finger casually toward the flame that began to lap at the tablecloth, extinguishing it.

Satsuki's heart was thudding in her chest as she patched her situation together on frayed nerves, rattled senses. The room spun sidelong before her widened eye; her cheekbone and temple ground against cracked fragments of her plate, the bits of porcelain nipping, burning against the shock. She groaned. A shaking hand had in some moment jumped to rest instinctively on the table, as if for leverage, but she did not attempt to rise against the queen's grip on the side of her skull.

Her face - her skin had been split - her face would probably scar. As twisted as the queen's narcissism was, Satsuki knew and accepted it was a source of protection. If Ragyou was willing to risk scuffing up her face, Satsuki knew, her situation was dire. What had she discovered? It was too soon. Her mind flickered automatically to the steak knife on the table nearby, but it would make for a pitiful weapon. Satsuki remained very still, stifling the breath that tried to race in her lungs as the queen spoke.

"Satsuki, Satsuki, my pitiful cub. When did you become so unsightly?"

"M-mother, forgive my impudence-," Satsuki tried to grovel, hoping against hope it was only for her words a minute ago.

"Shhh…" Ragyou hissed. The sound wasn't soothing. "Satsuki, my dear. From the time you were a dumb infant suckling the teat, I've done nothing but give to you. I've tried to give you whatever you please. I give you the finest tutors for your studies, the finest masters for your training. I give you good armor and weapons, and lend you my soldiers to command; I let you go off on your talent-scouting trips in the slums. I give you your own castle in the borderlands to refurbish into a center for training the counterinsurgency, to entertain your frivolous whims. Are you ungrateful?"

"No-," Satsuki's voice cut out in a grunt as Ragyou's grip in her hair squeezed, straining until she wanted to cry out. Bright spots danced over her vision.

"And now you're upset with me? So upset you would turn up your nose at the good food I provide you?" She rocked Satsuki's head a short way side to side over the ruined plate, grinding it down. "I've done my best to be a most splendid, loving mother to you - and yet you would *dare* to look so coldly upon me! I may be generous, but I'm not blind, my dear."

Ragyou had pinned her face-down while she spoke; as her breathing was obstructed, Satsuki began to truly panic. This couldn't happen. Years of preparation couldn't end with one fit of rage. But what had provoked her?

Muffled sounds of protest came from Satsuki's throat, and she pushed on the table with her hand, fighting as her lungs began to ache. But the queen was inhumanly strong, and Detriment magic was sapping Satsuki's strength, poisonously vicious. Her muscles grew feeble, and her magic was no longer simply being tasted: it was being devoured, stripped callously away, the violent theft wracking her body with pain. She fumbled instinctively at her robe for a small, hidden flask, but faltered.

If she ran, she wouldn't escape the queen and the High Sorceress. To use the potion enchanted with Augment arcana, to break the hold of her mother's enfeebling magic on her, would be to accept that all was lost. It would be to abandon her plans and to resolve right now, alone, unarmed, and unprepared, to fight.

And however Satsuki looked at it…

The probability of her successfully murdering the queen just now was all but nonexistent.

The steely hand pulled her upright in the chair, and slammed her head down again. Satsuki's nose moved with a crunch, and a raw scream pierced the hall.

Then she was rising, being dragged by her hair away from the table, as the room spun wildly before her eyes. Smeared crimson stained

the shattered plate and the tablecloth below; it had pooled with the sauce about an edge of the bloody steak, and a stain of wine was spreading upon the surface, spilling vividly over its edge. Satsuki's chair fell with a resounding crack, and her heels slid over the floor tiles as she was towed away. Her head spun.

She knows. She knows?

"M-mother…" Her voice was high.

"*Silence*, you disgusting whelp."

She can't know!

Satsuki grasped at the hand in her hair, kicking her feet, sputtering for breath through her mouth. She couldn't fight. She was too weak - she had no strength, she could draw no magic. She couldn't fight, and it was horrifying.

Years spent planning, bowing, *calculating*, ever calculating - all of it crumbling away. Preparations fragmenting, shattering, as simply as the bloodied plate. Exploding like the skylight above the music room, spectacular, total in its destruction.

She felt a gust of cold night air as Ragyou pushed through a door; they were on a balcony, the tiles shortly replaced with stone. Satsuki yelled as she was pulled sharply - and she was held over the railing, hanging from the queen's frightfully strong hand. Her eyes were wide, her breath cold; blood pounded in her ears as she took in the courtyard and private gardens, the minuscule hedge sculptures dotting thin pathways several dozen meters below, in a sort of daze. Her hands, with barely the strength to grip, were circled mindlessly about the queen's wrist. With her body in its present state, and with her connection to the Worldflow paralyzed by Detriment magics, she had no power to save herself from such a drop.

"You need me to hold you up, don't you?"

Her throat shook. "Y… yes, Mother."

"But surely, if you're so very wise, you could hold *yourself* up if I were to…?"

"No, no," Satsuki whimpered, as the agonizing grip in her hair loosened to the slightest degree. "Please…"

A contemplative sound came from above. When the monarch spoke, her voice was serious. "Tell me, my girl. What was your mission, when I sent you and your troops to Gunroumachi in the south?"

Satsuki's mind raced. It had been months ago, but she recalled the town quickly. "My task was to slaughter everything that breathed, for their proven ties to rebel supply lines. To burn the settlement to the ground, and leave but two or three to tell of the destruction."

"And did you complete your task?"

"I…"

"You certainly *reported* that you were successful. You said it to my face."

"I… did."

"But what did you, the commander, have your troops do?"

"We pillaged and razed their storehouses - slaughtered their horses, burned the fields. I gave them a warning, they were scattered to the wind-,"

"And you *lied* to me," Ragyou said, firm. "Any other commanding officer would have been executed for such a boldfaced crime. I had my suspicions; now I find only months later that a town that was ordained to be purged from my kingdom still stands. And like that boy knight you brought to our ranks, those you lead grow hopelessly magnetized to you… Would you believe I needed to have Nui torture the truth out of soldiers *I* had lent to you, to uncover your deceit?"

If she hadn't still been dangling over the balustrade, and if there hadn't been so much wrong with what she'd just heard, Satsuki might have been relieved. The words flew to her lips, whimpering, desperate, and convincing - maximizing her probability of survival. "I'm sorry. The children's eyes, they would have haunted me!" she cried. "I was soft - I erred - but no more. I'll make it up to you. I'll-,"

"Will you do anything for me?"

"Yes. Of course…"

A smile curled on the queen's painted lips.

"Take care not to forget this feeling, Satsuki."

She shook her gently by the hair.

"Remember it, the next time treacherous thoughts tempt you to disobedience."

She pulled Satsuki back onto the balcony, flinging her harshly to the wall behind them. Satsuki met it with a rough sound, and consciousness left her before she reached the floor.

The princess awoke to darkness.

She wondered at first if it were a trick of the senses, or - with a flicker of panic - whether she had been damaged more than anticipated by her encounter with that wall. But then she recalled her situation, noting with some familiarity the unevenness of the dusty wooden floorboards against her side. She drew a hand in front of her face, waving her fingers. Her eyes functioned; the room was simply windowless and dark.

Satsuki sat up, cringing at the dull pain that clung to her scalp. A Replenisher had probably been allowed to see to the wounds on her face; Satsuki determined as much when her touch found no bleeding

or even scabbing on her forehead and cheeks, and her nose corrected and free of pain. But evidently the mage had been made to repair no more of her less visible injuries, leaving the remainder of the bruises and abrasions to heal in their own time.

It was impossible to discern the features of the room, but she moved slowly when she rose, hands in front of her until she found a wall and made her way from memory toward the door. It was barely worth the effort of checking it. Surely enough, when she tested the knob, it held fast.

She remained there a moment, and then retreated to the space behind her to sit and bide her time.

The first time she had been locked in the dark tower, she'd been too small to weave magic or hold an Aspect under her command; she had held practice swords, but her arms would never have supported the weight of something like Bakuzan. She might have cried, frightened, hungry and cold and wondering if she'd been forgotten here. The small princess had wailed her voice hoarse, senseless to the passage of time.

And she'd been blinded, petrified at the sight of light and color when the door opened one day, and she fell into her father's arms, the warmth of his chest, as he scooped her from the grimy floor.

Her father. He had been out on business beyond the capital when Mother locked her away, and he had torn the door open upon his return, the fierceness in his eyes almost startling to the cowering girl as he'd drawn near. Her mother had told him why she was there, some mistake the toddler had made, but the present Satsuki could no longer recall.

Ragyou had been far from pleased with the king for intervening in her discipline. She had only watched silently from beyond the doorway, disinterested, as her husband - Lord Kiryuuin Souichiro - rocked the girl in his arms, shushing, patting her head as she wept into the crisp fabric of his riding clothes.

Satsuki hadn't understood. She only knew that her father's arms meant safety.

That vanished the day he did.

Things grew worse, after he died. Mind fatigued by the passage of time, Satsuki dreamt restlessly on the cold floor, the darkness and her hunger thinning out what tangibility there remained to the boundary between wakefulness and sleep.

-"*If you don't like what I'm doing, then by all means - stop me.*"-

The princess shivered, and snapped to alertness at the click of a heavy key in the lock.

The light filtering into the room was blinding.

"Your Highness. The Queen sent me to let you out."

Satsuki blinked as she stood, stiff-jointed and dry-mouthed. Head high and shoulders back, she strode silently for the doorway, intent not to sway as her eyes struggled to adjust.

"Thank you, Hououmaru," she said to the woman standing at the door as she passed her. The words were but a formality.

"Thank not me, but the queen, for her mercy in dealing with you."

"Of course…" Satsuki studied a nearby window in the stairway, gradually relaxing the squint of her eyes. Midday to early afternoon, though after more than some three days passed, the total number of them grew increasingly uncertain. "I shall."

"M'lady, if I may. You surely possess adequate powers to have broken from this tower any moment you pleased. Why have you never-,"

"Do not take me for a fool, Hououmaru," Satsuki warned quietly, eyes cutting as she turned her head toward her mother's favored servant. The woman's face was expertly discreet, and had remained so even amid throwing experimental barbs; if she took any satisfaction in nettling the embattled princess, she did not show it. Her mouth was a short, emotionless line, face clinically disinterested behind round, eerily tinted lenses.

She folded her hands before her pale lavender surcoat, and dipped her head demurely. "Of course not, Satsuki-hime."

Satsuki strode for the stairwell down. Upon her release, she was free to go about her business; lost productivity was an irksome matter, but her mother's petty tactic of isolation was not so formidable, in part for the very reasoning with which Hououmaru Rei had just attempted to jab her pride.

It was not true helplessness, as it once had been; it would never so much as scrape at the present Satsuki's fortitude. Mere humiliation and discomfort were not things that the princess found difficult to endure. For now, she would see about some food and water in the kitchens… Then she would determine how to proceed. She would need to work with even greater caution, but proceed she would.

Her plot was secure; having had ample time to ponder what she knew, such was the conclusion she'd arrived at. Proof came in her certainty that if the queen were on the trail of the new recruits Satsuki had garnered from the Gunroumachi operation - if she had ascertained Satsuki's true motivation for sparing the townsfolk - Satsuki would already be dead. But she didn't know, and the fact that she had not immediately confronted the princess upon discovering her lie meant that she remained in the midst of investigation. Ragyou suspected more to her daughter's actions, but had yet to confirm. If anything, accidentally provoking the queen's wrath at dinner had served to alert Satsuki to what new threats her plans faced.

"Milady princess…" Hououmaru's soft monotone began again.

"What is it?"

"The queen requires your presence at the Bloodforge."

Satsuki's eyes widened slightly, in confusion well-concealed beneath her outward composure.

"Very well."

The bowels of the castle - such was the simplest way to describe the dank, musty depths at which the Bloodforge could be found. The weathered stairwell leading to it, down and down a twisting, earthen path, was dotted with magelight lanterns that rose soundlessly to life as Satsuki passed, each orb of blue light promptly dying with a muted hiss in her wake. Peculiar mosses and lichens clung to the walls, and thin rivulets of water webbed in places down the uneven, craggy stones.

The path began to straighten, opening into a cavern. Beneath a stone bridge that crossed the space, several channels of water ran through a gurgling brook before sloshing onward to an ancient archway. Foaming white tongues of water formed almost skeletal patterns where parted by rocks, eking out a shuddering dance in the brisk fluctuations of its current and glistening from the glow of the magelight. Hakuryou River, the most vital artery of the capital's heart, was at this point reaching its terminus.

Satsuki knew the chilled waters below soon swept out into the sea behind the castle, but not before crossing a distinct chamber beyond. Worn-down steps, barely distinct from a spindly dirt path, branched from one end of the bridge over which Satsuki walked. It wound down in the direction of the water's flow to greet a heavy door the princess knew was physically and magically locked, the queen the bearer of the only key.

This was not Satsuki's destination, however. Further down the main path stood another door, set into a solid and towering stone wall.

When the princess reached it, it yielded to the push of a gloved hand, already unlocked.

The air inside was hot, reeking thickly of smoke and iron, and the entry was framed with an array of various creatures' dried skulls - their collection, a hobby Nui enjoyed with her expended test subjects. As soon as Satsuki set foot here, she knew she was very much in the domain of the High Sorceress, a sanctum for the unholiest of work. Even the minor exertion of her walk here had been agitating, in reminding Satsuki of her painfully empty stomach; if nothing else, with her arrival in this place the distraction of her appetite swiftly abated.

The High Sorceress appeared around a pillar of stone, lilting into view and flitting past a worktable strewn with gemstones, bones, blueprints, and various unknown devices and tools. Of course, a Watching spell hung across the entrance to her laboratory, and had told of Satsuki's arrival. Nui stopped before the guarded princess, leaning forward enough that the taller woman tilted her head back, glaring down her nose in warning. But the petite sorceress paid no heed, a bubbly grin on her face, eyes flickering with something more than the dim red glow that seemed to cling to every surface of the forge.

Nui's hands clapped together around one of Satsuki's, lifting it happily between them. "You came!"

Satsuki withdrew her hand calmly, if quickly. "I was summoned here, so I have come. What business do you have with me?"

"This way - you'll see, you'll see!" Nui chirped, evidently rather proud of herself. She skipped away again, deeper into the forge, fog on the stone floor curling past her feet.

The High Sorceress hummed and strutted peppily as they treaded deeper into the cave; Satsuki, following behind, walked with her hands folded behind a straight back. In many a place, channels of molten rock ran along the edges of paths, lending the space its

cloying heat and deathly red glow. The pumps that ventilated air to someplace far above bellowed rhythmically, like the low respiration of some huge, grotesque thing. Satsuki wondered at the sort of person who could work in such a setting, occupied so cheerily with enchantments and dark machinations for hours on end.

When Nui stopped at the foot of a short stretch of stairs, Satsuki's eyes rose to take in what lay beyond.

"Explain," she prompted, as Nui eyed her expectantly.

"A gift, from Queen Ragyou to you. Go on; you can take a closer look."

Studying her a moment longer, Satsuki ascended to the stone dais atop the stairs. In a beam of artificial light, arranged to hang neatly upon a stand, was a suit of light armor.

It was unlike any Satsuki had seen. Its make was elegant, the body consisting primarily of dark, carefully shaped leather layered down the sturdy-looking chest and torso; the legs, boots, and gauntlets consisted of tougher plates of what appeared to be metal, but held a curious sheen. The raiment was accentuated by royal blue cloth in two garments, a cape that hung from sharp shoulders and a robe that trailed from about a belt to the level of the ankles. Satsuki removed her glove and reached out, tracing a golden line down from the epaulette on a shoulder. Her situation alone was enough to place her on edge, but some quality of the armor itself struck her as uncanny…

"I toiled ever so hard to complete it," Nui was trilling. "Queen Ragyou wanted it nothing less than pristine, for you. Regalia so glorious, the gods themselves would envy its wearer!"

The hard pieces - they *weren't* metal, but bone. Just as Satsuki realized it, the armor gave a rattling shudder under her touch, and a ghastly image - the glare of two flaming, monstrous red eyes - was

imprinted powerfully upon her awareness, as if the armor evaluated her in turn.

She drew her hand away sharply. "Necromancy!" she hissed.

Nui only shook her head, curled pigtails bouncing. "More *preserved* than drawn back, but that's beside the point, Satsuki-hime."

"And what is the purpose of this - this thing?"

"You need power, do you not?"

That was not Nui's voice. The High Sorceress stepped back, curtsying as the queen glided up to the foot of the steps.

"The power to subjugate the dragonchild. If that is what you seek, this armor can assist you. You can feel it, can't you, my girl? If you can learn to handle it properly, a bit of protection from blades or blows won't be all it has to offer."

Satsuki held the queen's eyes stonily. Part of her wanted no piece of whatever foul magics Nui had managed to concoct. Another part saw the challenge in Ragyou's words, and knew better than to refuse her 'gift' at a time like this, whatever peril may accompany it.

Still another felt the power pulsing through the armor as it quaked beneath her touch - a steel-cold essence just barely restraining a thirst, an ambition, that it exuded like ancient might.

"You'll don it, won't you, Satsuki? You said yourself that you would do *anything* for me, sweet girl. If that is so, do not delay. I'll allow you one last chance to make amends…"

The princess glowered toward the armor, and cast away her belt and coat. She unfastened her breastplate, discarded gauntlets and other pieces, and soon stood in her underclothes before the construct.

When now she took hold of it, it sensed her intent and *leapt* from its stand, scattering pieces snapping to her and reassembling in quick

succession, closing around her and locking sharply in place. Satsuki yelled as it squirmed against her, as it scrutinized her eagerly, and pain pierced her body as an invisible force seemed intent to strip her apart, to claw into her skull. A harsh snarl of contempt - it sprang from Satsuki's curling lips, shook her, but was not hers.

She shrank in on herself, grasping her shoulders and gritting her teeth - and straightened with a bellow of war. Whatever possessed the armor was trying to encroach on her will, and she would not allow it. Her resolve clashed against it, crashing through its surprise like a wave, a spear plunged into its heart. She clenched her fists and tore out its power, wresting its redoubling strength into her grasp as it fought to devour her.

Even through the pain saturating her senses, she felt the bolt impaling her wrist, and grasped at her arm in shock to examine it - a spike of bone jutting cleanly through the gauntlet, streaked richly with her blood. But just as it would have begun to drip, the string of blood shrank inward again, eschewing the hold of gravity to vanish into the interface of the armor and her skin. A vicious blue glow rippled across its surface, and Satsuki felt a cold so pervasive it burned, as her hand whitened, fingers splaying and twitching to odd angles, her body twisting tautly in anguish as she stretched onto her toes. Saliva ran from her mouth, and her neck tensed, head jolting in quick, disjointed motions.

If I don't rein this in - it will - k-kill me… !

Somehow, past the sweat burning her bulging eyes, she found her gaze had fallen on her mother. A sultry smirk, on painted lips. Ragyou was excited, amused by the spectacle and awaiting the outcome.

Maddened, Satsuki raised her head and flung back her arms with a valiant, furious roar. The armor reshaped itself around her, bending and ordering itself to her will. Her tenacity was winning out. Her vision was whitening, her body burning with stimulation at the

reactions taking place as it bonded to her. She heard a rumbling voice-

DRAGONSOUL-

OVERRIDE

And an incomprehensible strength filled her body as light erupted around her, shaking the world.

A whine sounded at her feet as she entered the room.

Ryuu looked down at the hound, who lay with his boxy head flat between his paws. A few inches from his nose sat a full dish, the meat that had been placed in it several minutes ago untouched.

"What's the matter?" she asked, kneeling at his side. Senketsu was silent, eye trained on nothing in particular before him, with a bright intensity. Every few moments, he seemed to fidget in place. He really did have a sharper sense for things than her, she mused, reaching down and popping a bit of his dinner into her mouth.

His head whipped around toward the thief as she chewed, an indignant sound almost squeaking up his throat.

"Meat's expensive," she defended. "If you're gonna get an upset stomach, pick a kibble day to do it-,"

He butted his head into her arm, pushing her off-balance. With a snorting huff, he began working on his supper bowl in slopping, snapping bites, neatly securing the diced poultry from further acts of theft.

"That's a good fellow," Ryuu chortled, ruffling the fur on his head.

When she stood and stretched, she turned her head idly. Her eyes rested high on a wall of the room, in the direction of Upper City - of

the castle, she might have supposed.

A chill came over her, an itch not unlike her magic-sense prickling at the back of her neck, and a decided frown settled on her lips.

~ ~

Junketsu

[img: http://orig04.deviantart.net/9801/f/2017/168/a/e/ryuusatsjun_by_hinata0321-dbd1azy.png]

End

A Primer on the Arcane Arts, Part II:

Among those with multiple affinities, there exist no recorded cases of a single mage proficient in Arcana of the same domain but inverse in nature; Augment mages cannot access the Detriment Arcanum, the battlemagic-wielding Ravagers make poor healers, and those adept in Muddling can make no use of the counteracting Lucid arts.

Additionally, the Ravage Arcanum is unusual among the ten, in that those tied to it are typically limited to spells in a single one of its constituent elements. For this reason, when referred to individually most Ravage mages are simply described by their sub-affinity of Spark, Scorch, or Frost.

Den of Thieves

Chapter 8: Den of Thieves

As tensions rise in the kingdom's populace, Satsuki is sent to resolve a labor strike for the queen. In the city, Ryuu learns there is more to the thieves' guild than she knew.

Thanks to everyone who's commented! Feedback is always appreciated. Note that I generally reply to all comments including anon ones (usually quickly, but at latest before the next update), though I'm assuming it won't give you a notification. If you commented anon, you can check back to see my reply!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Eight \ Den of Thieves

"Some tea before your departure, Your Highness?"

Satsuki looked up from the heavy history text on her desk, peering over the upper rim of neat, round reading lenses. The elderly manservant offered a sad smile with the tea tray he held.

"Yes…" Satsuki answered, massaging her temple. After a moment's consideration, she shut the old tome, sealing cracked images of winged, clawed beasts away between yellowed pages. She would

not have much more time to devote to her personal studies before she was to set out. "Thank you, Soroi."

Folding and setting down her glasses, she watched him set out a saucer and cup and begin a smooth pour, methodical with decades of practice. The pooling, pale green liquid steamed gently in the office light.

Satsuki's brow quirked at a thought. "Soroi? Have you ever partaken of coffee?"

"I have," he said, mild surprise in the lines of his face. "The black drink is not so much to my taste, but I had it a fair number of times while attending Lord Souichirou in my younger years." Dark eyes crinkled nostalgically at the corners. "He was unlike most brought up in Upper City; he did not consider drinking it to be beneath him. I do not believe he favored the taste either, in truth, but when he visited the common people of the capital and the outlying settlements, he accepted their hospitality. Tea can be rather expensive to commoners, of course; he would not demand such a delicacy from his people, even if it was offered for the occasion."

"… I see."

"Forgive me, Your Highness - I've perhaps said too much…"

"No," Satsuki said. "It is nice, to hear of him. I can recall so little myself…" She paused and sipped her tea, gazing out an ornate window at the cityscape bathed in midday sun. From here, none could see in detail the disrepair of Middle City homes, or the charred refuge of the Darkstriders beyond; none would imagine the staleness of sewage in the poorer districts' streets. So long as Hakuryou River ran clean, so long as laborers did their work, Upper City's noblesse found no cause to concern itself with such things.

Still Kiryuuin Souichirou, a brilliant academic of Upper City breeding, had gone out among the common people near and far. He had done so to the chagrin of his family, and continued to do so after marrying

into the royal Kiryuuin name as crown prince, and rising as king. He had listened to their problems, and done everything in his power to address them bit by bit, be it spending slow hours on infrastructural plans or leading parties of soldiers and volunteers to exterminate dens of bloodthirsty fiends.

Far and wide, her father had built connections. Connections Satsuki now burned to the ground, as her mother willed her.

Nothing would be accomplished without Ragyou's trust. The queen's missions were tests; this one, no more so than the last. Perhaps each purge she carried out in the queen's name was a minor setback, but a setback drenched in blood.

"Be careful, Princess," Soroi urged at length. "If you ride alone…"

"I've been assigned attendants." Eyes of the queen, of course. "I was allowed to select a handful of soldiers, as well." A handful of grunts, to the typical battalion. And the queen seemed to have ensured the members of her Circle specifically would be occupied in the capital with various tasks, such as preparations for the upcoming Founding Day parade, and would be unable to accompany her. She understood Soroi's concern. With her reputation, riding with scarce support outside the walls would be a tricky affair.

She finished her tea, and looked down with a sigh. "But that too is the queen's wish, is it not? I'll never be alone out there… so long as I have this abomination to protect me, now will I?"

The armor rumbled, shivering subtly against her skin. I'll remember that, it seemed to say.

It held the capacity for pettiness, she supposed. Just as well, if it proved loathe to protect her. She had no intention of relying on its power for her task.

Junketsu - that had been his name, in life. But Junketsu in its present shape was just another tool in her hands, to be employed at the time

of her choosing.

Ryuu dropped in on the garden from over the fence, careful not to dirty her clothes. She slipped familiarly across the space, through the sliding doors, and into the Sensei's home.

She looked left and right. Mikisugi didn't seem to be in the living room down the hall. Thumbs hooked in her pockets, she wandered toward the office and printing press in the other direction, following the sounds of shuffling paper.

At a workbench near the tall wooden structure of the press, she found one of the sensei's assistants packing broadsheets for distribution, tying neat stacks of them in twine. Another thief, naturally - but a mousy boy of thirteen, he rarely partook directly in jobs just yet. Rather, he ran information between other hands of the guild.

"Running behind on the day job, Yoshi-chan?"

"You're a riot, Miss Ryuu," her junior said, focus not straying from his task. Always wanted to be praised by the Sensei, poor brat. But he took pride in his work, even that which revolved around printing and distributing whatever stories the Crown scribes supplied them. This was the type of 'honest' work that put rin in the pockets of them that couldn't cut it as full-time thieves. Consistent production of goods also increased the Crown's tolerance for the less savory operations many of its Middle City businesses were tied to.

The tactic wasn't unusual, but lawmen would come down harder on thieves than they would on prostitution rings, slavers, dogfighters and the like. The rest of those undesirables kept their operations to Middle City and below. Even if someone caught wind that Mikisugi's Crown-conscripted printing press, or the Takarada-owned Dancing Pig for that matter, housed purposes beyond the ostensible, Enforcement wouldn't bat an eye if it suspected human trafficking or amateur alchemists cooking up cheap drugs.

But thieves? Organized thieves were in a league perhaps shared only by rebels and Darkstriders in drawing the ire of the Crown. And of these groups, the thieves alone actively screwed with Upper City's elite, on a regular basis at that. Much as Ryuu's ego appreciated this fact, it meant that when Enforcement came down on a thieving band, it came down hard. Ryuu had seen it happen before, on a smaller organization that once rivaled their guild - and naturally, the crackdown had been cause for a celebratory bloodbath in the Square.

She shook her head. Bad enough their guild might be the one compromised now, if Takarada's confession held any weight; she would just waste energy dwelling on it now. The Sensei and the rest of the council, the brains of the guild, were convening today to sort through the possibilities and lay down a course of action. For now the guild was on alert, most jobs had been suspended, and kids like Yoriyoshi cranked dutifully away at their service to the Crown.

"What's Upper City readin' about these days?" she asked the trainee. Part of his job was summarizing the content they were given in case Mikisugi didn't have time to read in detail.

"Coverage of the *event*, of course," he muttered. "They're not going to be tired of that for a while. This time, featuring bonus hysteria over the *unsophisticated* and belligerent nature of commoners not properly controlled. Oh, then there's the princess on the move - set out days ago to settle some rebellion in the mining towns of Kokutani, before the *disease* of dissent infects the steel mills nearby. Aside from that, just more of the usual noise flashing by. Court marriages. Fashion trends. Upcoming galas and sporting events. Ads and holiday sales. A schedule of Founding Day festivities. All smattered with propaganda." He pushed drooping glasses up his nose. "They think hardly any of us commonbloods can read, but by the format of some of these, I fear for the noblesse attention span…"

"As long as there are no new 'wanted' sections for me," Ryuu chortled.

The tawny-haired boy shook his head, something softening in his eyes as he managed a smirk. "All quiet. They applauded your capture nice and loud; however much they might want to put out an alert for you, they're not about to parade your humiliating the castle guard with an escape."

If only he knew the half of it. More importantly, there were still no headlines about the appearance of a dragon; at this point, she doubted there would be. The Crown likely intended to keep her emergence under wraps until they had her under control, a prize to flaunt and boast of their power.

Ryuu frowned; just thinking of the Kiryuuin royals put a bad taste in her mouth. Days ago, she had watched stonily from a distant rooftop as the princess and a modest party had galloped beside the Hakuryou, bound for a city gate. "The Junpakko on the prowl, huh… Off to redden her hands for the queen, no doubt."

"They say she's so elegant she's never so much as sullied her white robes with a single drop of blood. Here's hoping the white tiger at least gets her coats all grey with coal dust," the boy spat, waving a paper.

Ryuu scoffed, similarly humorless. Now that she knew a little more about the princess, she knew those laborers wouldn't have a good time with what was coming for them.

It doesn't suit her, some part of Ryuu nagged. The woman she'd fought hardly seemed suited to the role of 'Queen's attack dog.'

"Where's the Sensei?" Ryuu asked eventually. "I'm supposed to meet him here; I came on time and everything."

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" Yoriyoshi asked, nose wrinkling. "I had to run and ask the council to postpone the meeting, earlier; it's what set me behind here. Something came up…"

Ryuu found the Sensei - and others - in his quarters.

Even granted permission to enter, introduced with an alias to the guests as another apprentice, she hung around at the room's edge to give them their space. A man who looked to be from a rougher district sat with a drab, scruffy-haired, glasses-wearing gentleman at the bedside. On the bed lay an exhausted, almost dazed woman, a newborn slumbering at her side.

The Sensei had many skills; and the couple had likely come here because they knew the man at the printing press was literate. In the past he had taught plenty of neighborhood kids, and a young Ryuu, to read.

"Thank you again," the father was saying softly. He rubbed his neck, managing a flustered chuckle. "I know you're a busy man… and the gods are taking their time, aren't they?"

"Don't worry about it," the scruffy man said. Even his voice sounded older, frailer, when he donned his kindly printmaster persona; it was as if air whistled and creaked softly on its way from his throat. With his back hunched as it was, he struck an altogether unimpressive figure. "The gods taking their time to mull it over is a sign of good luck. Yes - your girl has a big future ahead of her, I'd reckon." He gave a comforting look. "They'll settle on something," he reiterated. "We'll know when they do. A little wait isn't anything unheard of."

Ryuuko had heard the same bits of reassurance plenty of times before, watching the Sensei help people. Some were decided almost immediately; every once in a while, the gods' apparent deliberation took hours. Her father had told her that hers didn't show for days, so her mother, lost in childbirth, hadn't even gotten the chance to see…

The air in the room shifted; a candle on the nightstand dimmed, burning low with a steadiness that stretched on for an unnatural number of moments.

Ryuu couldn't help drifting close enough to read, though she still kept a respectful distance. Mikisugi turned the quiet newborn over carefully, supporting the chest and head as he lowered a swaddling blanket from the nape of her neck.

Liquid light soon played on soft skin - etching out strokes, characters, on the surface. Ryuu had trained to do this part, too. Two kanji, it looked like. She watched like a hawk as they took shape. Names often had uncommon readings, but it was said that if a witness recognized the characters in the spirit writing, the pronunciation would come to them. If it were up to her, would she catch it?

When the name had unfolded, it shone for several seconds, and faded completely. The muted candle flame returned to normal height, and the chill of some otherworldly being's presence lifted from the room. Mikisugi's eyes flickered smartly to Ryuu above his glasses, seeing she'd been paying attention. He nodded.

She bit her lip, hoping she had it right. "*Yukina*," she said confidently, meeting eyes with the parents. "Spelled with *snow* and *shore* ."

"Correct," Mikisugi muttered, taking up a prepared calligraphy pen and a firm, rectangular card. He reproduced the characters of the gods' name for her in a neat hand, and placed the card in a small box the parents had probably provided for safekeeping. "Takanashi Yukina, then? A beautiful name…"

"Th-thank you, sir," the father sniffled, while the mother held Yukina close, repeating the name over and over, as if to commit it to memory. The daughter would live by her true name, as had neither of her parents, her grandparents, and her great-grandparents before them. It was said that the gods had no difficulty recognizing those who went by their true names.

Where's that put me, then? Ryuu wondered briefly, brow wrinkling. Supposedly her father had wished for her name, and the gods had answered. The ruddy old coot had *always* used her true name when she was small, but it had grown comfortably scarce ever since. Maybe she hoped against hope that the gods would forget they'd ever brushed the name *Ryuuko* onto her neck. They'd turn their eyes from her, and find someone else to dance to old prophecies. They could give her name to them, for all she cared.

If she weren't lucky, she supposed wryly, they'd heard the Kiryuuin… heard *Satsuki* shouting at her on their battlefield, and found Ryuuko again.

-"*Hide it, store it away, but never forget it. To reject one's name is to reject one's destiny."*-

Ryuuko tilted her head back, thoughtful.

The child on the bed opened her eyes, beginning to whimper and cry.

The walk was quiet. Ryuu's eyes were heavy on the cobblestones, her hands in her pockets, and Mikisugi, sensing her contemplation, made no effort to chat. At a flutter of wings, the young woman's eyes rose to a crow that perched motionlessly on a bakery sign, seeming to study her with beady black eyes. She looked down again.

The two split up in the bar of the Dancing Pig. Flicking a silver *rin* into the air for a surprised Ryuu to catch, the sensei headed down to a meeting room, leaving the disciple to drift to the bar and order a hot drink. She breathed its steam in appreciatively when it arrived.

Within minutes a sturdy fellow plopped down on the stool beside her, soon acquiring himself a tall mug of water. Ryuu stayed intent on nursing her steaming glass of grog. Fruit and spice bit her tongue with the alcohol.

"Drinking before an audience with the council, Ryuu-kun?"

"Sard yourself, Kinagase."

"Whoa, whoa! I'm not lookin' to fight any scrawny girls today, promise."

"Not lookin' to get your arse beat by one, you mean?" She glanced at the Sensei's senior apprentice. A stern jaw and nose, and his customary surly expression, looked back. His hair was combed back in short spikes, dark but for a tuft dyed red near his hairline. "This brew makes me alert. You know that."

He chuckled, and threw back a big gulp of water. "It's too hot out for that shit."

"Could be hotter." She straightened her cravat at her collar, and her eyes slipped to the side, at the sound of chairlegs scraping at the floor. More thieves were seating themselves nearby; she'd be pretty well surrounded soon. Most of the guild's hands respected her; some were even close to what she could call friends. But after what had gone down the last time she'd dined here, she found the place, and its inhabitants, put her on edge. This was her first time really back; pox if she'd let her guard down…

Bristling at more sounds of shuffling feet and rearranging chairs behind her, she lowered her drink and turned round on her chair, mouth opening to give them an earful.

"Th-the castle's dungeons," a younger thief in the crowd said suddenly, eyes wide. "What were they like?"

She almost spat. "I don't want to talk about that shit. If you're good enough not to get *caught*, you won't have to worry about 'em, right?"

The thieves around her seemed to deflate. She grimaced.

"What's there to tell? Cramped cell, hardly any food or water per day. Daily *interrogations*, if you will, by Enforcers with nothing better to do with their time. My pain tolerance is nothing to sniff at, though," she sneered. "I was messin' with their heads the entire time they were trying to break me. They beat me, cut me, brought mages to shock me and burn me and *heal* me just so they could shock and burn me some more… It hurt, yeah. It was rough, yeah. But I'm one sarden tough thief, remember?"

She smirked, seeing she'd already captured the interest of even the more stoic fellows listening in. She knew she held an almost mythical status among the other hands of the guild - her perfect record, broken only by her latest capture at the castle, her subsequent escapades, and her return from the dead, was only part of it. Kinagase aside, they didn't know what she really was - they just knew she was ungodly quick on her feet, that she'd at one point or another slammed most of their hands onto one of these tables in contests of strength, and that she was able to kick and throw grown men across the bar. Most figured she was some type of Augment mage, but the speculation went round and round. Needless to say, she had a reputation here, and her ego didn't mind it one bit.

"The Chief of Enforcers," a level-headed bloke said, trying not to sound too interested. Ryuu knew him as more of an information gatherer. "Kuroido Takiji resigned from the station, and a new one was appointed, while you were gone. If *you* spent so much time with the lawfolk, did you hear anything of the reason?"

She almost choked on her drink. Overcoming laughter, she flashed her teeth. "The old chief was a slimeball, as I'm sure many of you know. And he didn't like my attitude, see? Didn't like that I had the *nerve* not to snivel and cry when they hurt me, not to tell them what they wanted and beg for forgiveness and cry my loyalty to the queen. So one day, in the private of my humble prison cell, he thought he'd have a little *fun* with me, yeah? Drugged me up to make sure I'd be good and cooperative, had me chained down for his convenience and everything."

Her cohorts balked as understanding dawned. Tsumugu's eyes were wide, his teeth gritting and face darkening in something like rage. "R-Ryuu… !"

She took a swig. When she looked at the crowd again, her eyes were viciously cold. "First move he made, I bit the filthy bastard's prick off. *Chewed* it. And *spat it at him* ."

After a few moments of shock, and one man slumping off his stool and to the floor with a thud, cheers rose from the thieves. Tsumugu ruffled her hair, absolutely roaring with laughter, while others slapped at her shoulder and back.

"No one messes with our Ryuu!"

"Shitbag thought he'd break the Underworld's Ryuu!"

"Ain't know nothin' about our streets!"

"And your escape!" someone was trying to get in over the noise. The rollicking quieted down as more tuned in to the topic. "Did you seriously escape *and* kidnap the legendary Junpakko? And then you somehow smuggled her all the way back hereabouts without gettin' caught?"

She crossed her arms, brushing it off with practiced confidence. "A pro's gotta' keep some of her tricks to herself, yeah? The escape was madness - dodging battlemages, archers, knights and soldiers left, right, and above - but again, they weren't ready to handle this!" she boasted, thumping a hand against her chest. "What you really want to hear about is my going *toe to toe* with this 'Junpakko' everyone's so afraid of!"

Tsumugu picked up on the necessity of the topic change, and rolled with it before anyone could nag about the specifics of the escape. "I still can't believe you fought the princess."

"At one point, I picked up and *suplexed* the princess."

Tsumugu's expression was half-incredulous, half-mirthful, eyes wide over a smile that tried to crop up at the absurdity as he slammed his water glass on the counter. "You're fulla' shit!"

"I've suplexed you," Ryuu pointed out. "And the other day, didn't I toss you through a table halfway across this very tavern?" she asked, spying and nodding toward the larger pieces of broken wood that had been pushed to a wall near the hearth. "Even in armor, she doesn't weigh near as much as you."

"Well, sure, but that's *different*," he insisted slowly, longsuffering. "You're telling me you suplexed the Junpakko and got away with your life?"

"What part of 'toe to toe' don't you get? One solid throw wasn't even the half of it. Fought her to a standstill, I did! She pulled out all the stops and *still* couldn't bring me down! We traded blows so fast and hard normal people would've been blown away in an instant. You wanna check me, you can take a look at the crater we blasted into the Scrapyard."

Tsumugu chortled in spite of himself. "You've got one monster of a sack on you, Ryuu."

"I should bloody hope not!" she snapped back, feigning offense.

"Let it be known and never forgot that Miss Ryuu has a bigger sack than anyone here!" a tipsy thief called cheerfully, raising his pint. "To Ryuu's scrote!"

The words echoed through the sizable crowd as several glasses rose in agreement, clinking merrily together overhead as laughter filled the tavern.

Tsumugu rolled his eyes, but met the sniggering Ryuu's mug of grog with his water glass nonetheless.

"Feeling at home again yet?"

At that lower voice, Ryuu's gaze shifted to find Mikisugi had sidled up behind the bar counter, leaning to rest on his forearms. Ryuu groaned. "I don't guess you managed to miss the toast to my imaginary sack, did you?"

"'Metaphorical' might be more precise. And more of a toast to its immensity," he noted.

She groaned. "Swiving dolts."

"They're our dolts," Mikisugi said, "and don't pretend you're not one of them." The Sensei stole the last sip of her drink, and she stopped herself from snapping at him since he'd technically paid for it. He clapped her on the shoulder, sobering with something of a wince in his eyes. "… Come along, Ryuu. The council is ready to see you."

The walls of the Dancing Pig's main level were charmed with weak Muddling - a subtle rune shaped to sieve and spin a small bit of the passing Worldflow to generate the desired effect. Laid down by an underground professional, renewed often and checked oftener, it twisted what was said within to the ears of listeners from without. Passerby, or those with ill intentions, would notice only laughter and muted, indistinct chatter from the den of thieves, the sounds of words themselves smoothly parted and rearranged.

A good portion of the basement below the tavern didn't officially exist. A considerably higher price was paid for the hidden charms that kept it as such; beyond the bar storeroom, a number of meeting rooms where thieves did business and took assignments were soundproof and magic-proof to the outside world. Ryuu wondered sometimes if even the gods could have entered through these walls.

The last time she had been down here, she'd been under the escort of the Boss's lackeys, her hands tied behind her back, scowling and wondering if she should have made a break for it. Her stomach had dropped steadily with their progression, as routes of escape ultimately narrowed and closed off to a single well-guarded hallway

and staircase behind her. But she'd walked cooperatively, trying to trust Mikisugi's insistence that it was for the best.

Now she walked at the Sensei's side, the back of her neck prickling with more than magic-sense. She couldn't fly from here. Sure, if she ever needed to she could bust through locked doors, could run faster than practically anyone; she could even transform in a not-too-cramped space and mow down everyone in a room. But it was like her prison cell, like the dungeon, she realized. It was a place she couldn't enjoy the security of knowing she could spread her wings and launch straight into open sky.

You're among allies, she reminded herself, trying to steady her nerves. She wasn't in the wrong, this time. But Mikisugi's stoic presence beside her provided minimal comfort as they walked the hall, as he was steeped in a preoccupied silence.

They entered the largest of the rooms - the meeting chamber of the council of thieves. A few levels of empty auditorium-like benches descended from the walls of the circular room to a flat floor, a heavy table at its center. The boss's position at the round table was directly across from the door; six other wooden chairs were arranged on that half of the table, each but one filled by thieves Ryuu was mostly unfamiliar with. These were the men and women who kept the guild running in the background.

An alarm went off in Ryuu's head as she and her sensei descended the steps. The few times she'd been here, she'd never seen more than three of the council chairs occupied at once. Hell, she'd never seen more than a few in the same place at the same time; when she'd been apprehended by Takarada for her breach of the code, Mikisugi and two other council members had hung around that room. But here were all seven in the same place.

Allegations against the boss were serious business, she reasoned, stifling her shock. Especially so when it tied into questions of compromised security of the guild.

Mikisugi went around to take his seat, leaving Ryuu to bow her head slightly and sit in a lone, spare chair across the table from Takarada.

Ryuu tried to read Takarada's face. Preoccupied, oddly similar to Mikisugi's. She raised a brow.

"So, what's the verdict?" she asked, seeing a prim older gentleman's mustache seem to ruffle at her speaking before them. "Is Takarada enjoying his fancy seat one last time?"

A few exchanged glances. The one to speak was a woman about Mikisugi's age, in a picture hat and dress expertly selected to look dapper for a businesswoman of Middle City but easily too plain for Upper. "Takarada-san… is not being expunged from the council."

Ryuu lifted a brow. "Did he not compromise the guild?"

"Oh, he did," a middle-aged fellow grumbled, a sardonic half-smile on his lips. "We had a nice, honest chat with him. The little twat came into contact with someone who wanted the thief Ryuu gift-wrapped for the castle guard - someone who knew enough to track down Kaneo-kun as your boss. And he sarded the Code, took her hush money, and handed you over, all the while too busy dribbling on his boots to *tell* us about it." A strong hand rose, thumb scraping at stubble on his chin. His eyes were intense on Ryuu. "It's hard to predict from their interaction how much the contact already knew. What I need to know right now though, Ryuu-kun, is whether the lawmen broke you in those two weeks you spent in their care. Aikurou says you were interrogated."

"What?" she cried, incredulous. "Of course I didn't give! But you can't tell me you're not punishing Takarada for-,"

"Speak *calmly*, Ryuuko," the man said, gruff. "And answer again."

She blinked, almost startled before she realized why - and shot Mikisugi an accusatory glare. She hadn't given him permission to give out her true name, not even to the council, certainly not to the

former boss of the guild. The Tongue-Cutter was what he'd been called in his time. In his cloak and leather armor, face scarred and hair peppered with gray, he gave off the air of a cutthroat more than a thief. He'd ruled his thieves in a regime more brutal than Takarada's, with the help of a Bloodborne power that gave him an eye for falsehoods.

His irises seemed to gleam, weathered eyes just a touch too wide, from a face darkened by the shadow of his hood. Ryuu met his scrutiny squarely. "I didn't break. The lawmen didn't get one shred of info out of me."

He grinned with disarming cheer, eyes shutting. "Good to know," he said, nodding. "Well done, kiddo."

"Hold on just a minute, now," Ryuu said seriously, starting to get annoyed. "Takarada proves himself capable of selling his thieves to the Crown, and you lot think it's a good idea to leave him in charge of things?" She winced. "I didn't break, I didn't bring the Enforcers down on your heads, so no harm done? Is that it?"

"Takarada is no longer the boss here," Mikisugi said, hands folded on the table before him. "It's to be announced tomorrow. The council has voted for me to succeed him at the head of our… operations. Takarada will remain on the council, with his powers restricted. But…"

"But?" Ryuu echoed. She picked up on a splash of white against black clothing - a flower he must have tucked at some point into his waistcoat's breast pocket. He hadn't had it on him a minute ago; she would have noticed when he clapped her on the shoulder in the tavern. Something was wrong. Something was so bloody wrong here…

"Takarada erred - *badly* - but the council's decision is that we can't overlook his contributions over the years to the guild's mission. If he hadn't put his inheritance of the *Takarada Shipbuilding* fortune into

this mission, and his time into managing our assets, it wouldn't be anywhere close to where it is today."

"Our mission?" Ryuu laughed coldly, not caring anymore how she might look to her superiors in the room. "To screw the noblesse out of some valuables, and build our wealth out of their scraps?"

"Ryuu… Ryuuko," Mikisugi decided, not flinching at the warning look she gave him. "Where do you think the guild's money goes? Why do you think the hands like you and Tsumugu and Yoriyoshi get such small cuts from your work? Have you ever thought about it?"

She eyed him. "A bit has to go to expenses for the guild," she said, "but it's a relatively small amount, given the size of the guild and the value of some of the things we steal. There's business, paying off informants for good intel, and the like. Good deal of the rest probably goes to lining that pig's pockets," she said, nodding toward Takarada.

The Sensei clapped softly. "You *have* thought about it. In a normal case, that conclusion would probably be accurate." He smiled gently, but there remained something uneasy about his demeanor. "What if I told you that beyond living expenses, Takarada's just about satisfied with enough rin to keep up his wardrobe?"

Ryuu looked sidelong at the boss - the *old* boss, who sat with his head in his hands. She only ever seemed to see him in gaudy coats and suits and jewelry, but nothing of that scale should have come close to bankrupting the guild. Her brow wrinkled as she added things up, and added again, trying to overestimate generously. "… Then I'd say we're up to some shady money-making operation here."

"And we're not hoarding it, either," Mikisugi continued. "It's being spent. Carefully, but it's going toward our… our mission, if you will. A mission your father imparted on all of us here."

Ryuu was shaking her head. She was exceedingly conscious of the eyes studying her, of the confines of the room, of how her wings

couldn't carry her from this. "The hell are you getting at? You blokes think this is funny? What's my old man have to do with the guild?"

"With the historical thieving bands of the city? Not much." It was the older gentleman who spoke, trying to give her a reassuring look.

"But with the guild as we know it today?" the woman in the dress picked up. "The unification of thieves in arms that arose in the last few decades, heading perhaps the largest organized crime operation *ever* to elude the eyes of the Radiant Dynasty's Crown? *Everything*, dear."

"My father is a hermit living in the woods…" Ryuuko took a step back. She'd never known much about many of the people in this room, but she was beginning to grasp just how much she didn't know. About her father, and about Mikisugi.

-"*When you reach the city, there's a man you must locate - an old friend of mine. He's known as The Sensei."*

"*Won't there be… lots of 'teachers,' in such a big city?"*

"*Trust me. If you search for this fellow, he'll find you. He'll help you."*-

Mikisugi Aikurou. The man, the sensei, who'd taken her in and taught her to read and taught her to survive and brought her up as a thief. She thought she knew him. She had to know him. He knew her secrets, and she'd trusted him with them.

"Ryuuko," he said, "try to calm down."

She was breathing fast. "Don't u-use that sarden *name* -,"

But he shook his head. "Ryuuko, listen to me. It wasn't deemed safe to tell you before now. The people in this room are among the only ones in the guild itself who know our true purpose. But things have changed. The Junpakko is bound to come for you-,"

"*What* true purpose?!" she yelled, teeth bared. Several of the council members stood suddenly, wary. She didn't care. Her blood was simmering. "What can't you tell me?!"

She was a thief. A damned good one, but just a thief, and she was fine with that. She was fine with ruling the rooftops and streets of the Middle City night, with knocking out every job she was given, with sharing stories of scores and daring escapes, with bragging and shooting the shit with everyone at the bar.

Mikisugi exchanged looks with the others. Finally he held her eyes seriously, and spoke.

"This guild of thieves… is funding the resistance movement, and its armies, throughout the kingdom."

Ryuuko blinked.

"Do you understand? Matoi Isshin and I, with some of my colleagues, formed the most influential thieving guild in recorded history for the express purpose of amassing funds to mobilize, coordinate, and train the soldiers who will bring an end to the Radiant Dynasty's thousand-year regime."

"… This isn't funny. The rebels the monarchy yaps about - they're practically a myth. Even if insurgents start to pop up here and there, they get stomped flat by the likes of the Junpakko before anyone bats an eye…"

"And who is the Crown most desperate for? The ones they can't catch. Not rebels, but the *rebellion* . The larger movement their nets haven't yet been able to pin down. Try to understand. You've seen what they do to *suspected* rebels. Wasn't it safer not to know you were tied to the resistance? I'll bet the Enforcers asked if you're affiliated with it, when they tortured you. You were able to say you weren't, and to think you were telling the truth."

"Then why tell me now? Whatever Matoi Isshin did, I'm no part of it. Let me - let me keep stealing for the guild. You lot can throw the profits at your armies, hatch your loony plans, do whatever you bloody well please. I don't want a part of it."

Mikisugi shook his head. "You turned out to be useful as one, but you were never meant to spend your entire life a thief, Ryuuko, and you know it. The time approaches for us to begin to move, and we'll need your power - your *real* power - when we do. The reason you have this power, the reason you were sent to the city - it will all be clear soon enough."

"You're talking about bringing down the thousand year dynasty. The most powerful kingdom the world has ever known. With some thieving money and, what, some angry farmers?"

"Don't forget to factor in yourself, Ryuuko."

At his implication, she studied the others in the room, who seemed unsurprised.

If all this was true - if they were funneling money into a rebellion and were all so devoted to 'the cause' - Takarada wouldn't have sold one of their weapons to the Crown. Not one he'd known about.

But if the council understood presently that one young woman, however quick or strong, would factor so significantly into their odds…

She felt a chill as she finally recognized the look in the other council members' eyes - fear crossed with fascination. She'd seen it before, learned it before, when she'd learned from the time she was small not to transform where others could see. She'd learned to hide no matter how fierce the urge to do otherwise, no matter how the beautiful landscapes she'd seen in her childhood made her yearn to stretch her wings. But people who had treated her like a human were now regarding her anew, wondering how well she could be used to their benefit.

She looked to the Sensei again. "You *told* 'em…?"

"They needed to know-,"

"You bloody told them?!"

Mikisugi's look was pained. "Yes. I did, a few days ago."

"You had no right!"

He spoke slowly. "The fate of more than you could *imagine* may be riding on this rebellion's success."

"What, so now it's the fate of the world? What else are you waiting to tell me, then? What do I not need to know?"

Mikisugi had stood, and walked around the table toward her. "I just want to know you'll be ready, Ryuuko."

Her eyes were trying to water; she held back staunchly, grimacing. "No," she said, gaze flickering toward the flower in his breast pocket, like a protective charm. "You want to know I'm on your side." She gave a sneering, empty laugh, bitter. "You want to make sure I'm nice and *tame* ."

The sensei faltered before her at the words. Then he plucked the flower from his pocket, depositing it on the table. "I'm on your side, Ryuuko. I'd like to think you're on mine."

He reached out, folding her in an embrace. Her shoulders shook momentarily. Then she broke away, shoving him so hard he staggered. "Don't touch me."

He looked to the floor, cringing. "I'm sorry. You probably need time to digest all of this."

"Time will fix this, huh?" She studied him for a long moment, with the look of someone incredulous of what they saw. Her voice was low. "You're almost worse than the old man."

He looked up, wordless.

At that moment, the door to the meeting chamber burst open; Tsumugu stood behind it, eyes wide. "We've got a problem!"

"Go on," the hooded council man grumbled, when Mikisugi only looked up mutely.

Tsumugu's eyes darted toward Ryuu, uncertain for a moment. Great, she realized. Even he knew. He knew about this nonsense before she did.

Given the council man's instruction, he spoke. "Two Kokutani battalions engaged the enemy, and were wiped out. At least eight hundred, no survivors. It was over in minutes."

Ryuu watched numbly, trying to ascertain the implications of this news through the palpable shock icily overtaking the room of seasoned thieves, or commanders, or whatever the hell they were supposed to be.

After a stunned moment the old gentleman with the mustache spoke, hands planting on the table as he stood. "They moved without orders?!"

"The captains thought they had an opportunity. Everyone's been on edge, with word of the recent celebration; hatred for the Crown is at a boiling point. The troops were restless, and the captains thought they couldn't lose. They mounted an ambush. They thought that with sheer numbers-,"

"Idiots! Whatever the advantage, it's too soon!" Mikisugi hissed, having gathered his wits. "How many soldiers were in the force they attacked?!"

Tsumugu's look was cold, his face unusually pale.

"One."

Ryuu's eyes grew. She knew before he said it.

"The *Junpakko* ."

A lone figure stood in a field of corpses, her body supporting - and supported by - an elaborate suit of armor. She drew her black blade from the chest of a man on the ground; his charred body convulsed, and an immense halberd he grasped seemed to shimmer and grow pale, and dissolve away.

The survivor flicked blood from her greatsword, splattering an arc of deep crimson to the dirt as a royal blue cape rippled from prominent shoulders in a breeze. Then she planted the blade in the earth, catching herself as she collapsed behind it, panting raggedly, heart pounding in her chest.

The armor rattled and began to glow brightly, soon enveloped in shining droplets of light. It settled, horned helm fading, plates rearranging and shrinking away, to leave the lighter, dormant form of Junketsu clinging to Satsuki's form.

~ ~

Den of Thieves

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/8283/f/2017/182/6/7/the_crew_narrowcrop_1200_by_hinata0321-dbeobre.png]

End

A Primer on the Arcane Arts, Part III:

The vast majority of the kingdom's population are magical 'duds' whose circuits are not refined enough to extract specific Arcana from

the Worldflow or shape them as spells. Those attuned to magic are concentrated in the capital, especially among noble bloodlines.

While the inheritance of arcanic aptitude seems not to be strictly genetic (a magically-inclined child may be born to non-mages, and the inheritance of aptitude is not guaranteed in the children of mage parents), the occurrence of magical aptitude is far more common in the children of those with affinities themselves. The type of affinity, however, is not necessarily consistent between generations.

A/N: *The Life Fiber-worship cult OC who was alive for ~2.5 chapters of AtEoD has been reborn as Mikisugi's printing press assistant b/c why not*

The Black Valley, Part I

Chapter 9: The Black Valley, Part I

The princess knows that she is not fated to die in such a place. And if she were, she would overturn the tides of fate itself.

In terms of the outline, I initially expected this 'flashback' of what happened in Kokutani to be relatively quick ('It'll probably be part of a chapter'). As I was writing it, it turned out long enough to definitely be its own chapter, and then when I copied it from my 'story' document into its own document, I found it a bit long for a single chapter (though not nearly long as chapter 1, but that one's the exception) ^^'

I want to give people a little time to read, but you can expect the second 'part' to be posted as Chapter 10 soon, probably within a week.

WARNING: Some fairly intense action violence this chapter. (Also, a kind of long battle scene; if reading action isn't really your thing, you probably won't lose terribly much by skimming the fighty bits for italics and dialogue)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Nine \ The Black Valley, Part I

EARLIER

[FOOTHILLS OUTSIDE THE MINING PROVINCE OF KOKUTANI]

The princess's meeting with a representative of the miners the night before had not gone favorably. The discussion took place within a hurriedly furnished room within the small, opportunely located castle of Kokutani; the lord who oversaw the nearby settlements for the Crown had the honor of hosting Satsuki-hime's party for its excursion from the royal capital.

Satsuki had heard the strikers' demands from a haggard foreman, perhaps in his forties but roughly aged; his every word was tense, but his demeanor meek, like a kind man, and a scared man, trying his best to be stern.

The laborers who were forced to keep the mine producing sought either an increased daily wage, or a meal provided on their workdays if they were to continue to work so cheaply. They also desired to have a handful of magelights installed in the tunnels, and - and the nervous man had been pale but firm, to present such a request before the stone-faced Kiryuuin - to have Replenish mages sent from the capital to take a look at the workers who'd been hurt in a recent cave-in, as well as the ones whose lungs were going bad.

Hardly unreasonable demands. But with the eyes of her mother's lackeys on her, Satsuki had met his pleas squarely with the only answer she could.

"You will continue to work the mines for your queen, or you will suffer the consequences. You are in no position to seek compromise." She tilted her head slightly. "You live in a province rich in agriculture and near a center of trade. Populations of dangerous fiends in the surrounding area are relatively low. I've seen the borderlands firsthand, Kusamura-san; there are people in this kingdom well more desperate than you. They would *gladly* break their backs for the wage at which you scoff. Do you understand?"

He'd held her blank expression fiercely for several moments, and looked away. "I need to discuss this with them."

"You have one day. *Discuss* what you must."

"Okay! Okay… I'll explain to them. I'll try to get them back to the pits, so no one will need to force your hand, *Your Highness* ."

When he'd been escorted from the meeting room, one of Satsuki's attendants hissed that she should have cut him down for his disrespect.

"Is a bloodless resolution not preferable?" Satsuki remarked, turning to the neatly dressed man - some young court bureaucrat assigned by the queen, to survey Satsuki's work. In his late twenties, he wore blue robes, light but lined with decorative trim, a uniform matched by the frowning woman at Satsuki's other side. "Workers take time to replace," Satsuki continued. "The queen's orders were not to massacre them, but to resolve the matter *as I deem fit* ." She sipped a cup of the tea their hosts had provided, and set her cup on the table for the man to refill.

Kusamura returned punctually in the morning. This time, when the foreman had his audience with the princess in the meeting room, he bowed to the floor and remained there.

"We will continue to work," he said solemnly. "Our only demand is that you come to see our sick and wounded, and hear about the condition of the mines."

"And what good will that do your sick and wounded?" the female attendant spat. "Will the princess's eyes lift their ailments, hasten their return to work?"

"My request is for Her Highness. Please," he said, looking up at Satsuki. "Are you not the daughter of King Souichirou, bless his soul?"

"Ingrate! It is *hardly* worth the princess's time to-!"

Satsuki raised a hand, silencing the attendant who spoke up. "I shall go," she said.

"Thank you," the foreman said, his eyes round in surprise. "Thank you, Lady Princess. If it is possible, I ask that you take this experience to pardon us our disrespect. We've… we've heard of what you do, to insurgents. But we're not rebels; we're workers, and we're suffering, but we'll do our part for the Crown."

The ride to the mines was quiet for a half hour, a procession of horses galloping into a morning bleak with clouds. Led by the old workman, they passed uneventfully through settlements and farmland along the main road, and eventually parted from it onto a gently winding path.

Satsuki slowed her horse, falling back before keeping pace with an attendant and soldier who'd been flanking her. "It may be dangerous," she said quietly to the bureaucrat, eyeing the steep hills that rose on either side of the path ahead. What she suggested was unlikely, she knew; this was certainly the most direct route to the mines. But her instincts would not allow her overlook such an ideal location for an ambush. Her present company would be more burdensome to her than anything, if something proved amiss. Satsuki nodded to the lady and her counterpart. "I would prefer you two turn back and wait in the last town."

"We are not to leave your side, Satsuki-hime," the lady pointed out, and the other attendant nodded. "On Her Majesty's orders." Determined, though they seemed already exhausted; the two could not have been accustomed to such long trips from what riding practice they'd received in their studies among court gentlemen and ladies, and had remained this morning visibly stiff from the longer trip to the provincial castle. The poor beasts carrying them were jittery, picking up on the riders' inexperience in the ways they handled their reins and their weight.

Satsuki surveyed her soldiers briefly, recalling each one's name and specialties. Shortly she met eyes with one of the nearest, and the woman seemed to sit straighter when she did. The order to observe her didn't apply to the common soldiers the queen had permitted Satsuki to select.

The princess pulled up beside her. "Motozaki - you, Ooba, Asagiri, and Hikoe, break off and scout the hills ahead."

Motozaki saluted, self-consciously straightening an already straight helmet before signaling to the others. Two to either side, the four horses broke away.

Satsuki urged her horse faster, catching up with the foreman in the lead.

"Is something the matter, Lady Princess?"

"Not at all, Kusamura-san. But one cannot be too cautious of bandits on the road. Let us rest a minute," she said, eyeing the rising hills at the mouth of the valley. A meager stream wound lazily through the flat center, the only remnant of the river that had once coursed through.

She saw his gaze flicker to the soldiers riding ahead and vanishing into the hills. He then seemed to examine the overcast sky just a bit too pointedly. "We must press on. A storm brews; the river may flood."

The weather, geology and hydrology of her kingdom were among many things the princess had studied in detail. This river had not flown strong in centuries.

"My attendants tire. We will stop here," Satsuki said with finality, "and wait for my scouts to return."

Kusamura yanked on the reins of his horse, causing it to rear with a whinny of alarm as Satsuki's white destrier galloped on.

We should have stopped sooner. Satsuki was on full alert as she shifted her weight, cueing her mare to slow just enough, and then to pirouette and double back, with all possible haste. Witnessing the scene that unfurled as she raced toward them, she knew she wouldn't be swift enough.

The workman's rearing horse was passed by the horses of the attendants, whose gaits were agitated as they dodged around the alarmed animal. The soldiers were trailing several lengths behind the attendants; they weren't near enough to stop the workman weaving arcana that glowed in his hand.

A mage!

A bolt of energy lashed from his hand into the earth, just behind the hind legs of one of the attendants' horses. For one heartbeat, the energy webbed outward, disturbing a small area in the dirt. Then the Chaos magic exploded loudly behind the horses - a simple Rend spell, rupturing the ground in an unimpressive upward scattering of stone, but with a crack like too-close thunder.

The workman fell from his horse, which went running off in confusion. The male attendant's horse startled violently at the noise of the spell at its heels, toppling onto its side as the rider lost control, and crushing said rider's leg, if his yowl was any indication. While this happened, the other attendant's horse had bolted forward in terror, racing at full speed past Satsuki's warhorse and down the valley path.

Satsuki saw the soldiers veer to manage to avoid the noble attendant, and saw the stunned workman fall under the hooves of their mounts, just as she turned her mare again to take chase after the woman on the fleeing horse.

She began to falter, however, at the sight of an arrow sailing well overhead.

It had been a wild shot, probably. It came from the hills to the north, where the soldiers Motozaki and Hikoe had ridden, and arced across the valley, planting in a cliff face on the other side.

"*Hyah!* " Satsuki gave a fierce shout, urging her horse forward still faster in its sprint.

The arrow was the soldiers' standard, issued at one of the capital's barracks; at this distance, she could at least identify its fletching. It was a makeshift warning to the princess below. Some part of her wondered if the scouts she'd sent were already overtaken - and if one of the two, finding their capture or demise at hand, had spent the last arrow they'd been able to draw on signaling the princess rather than on fending off the enemies closing around them. Satsuki's eyes grew coldly fierce.

I chose my soldiers well.

And she flew headlong into the trap, for the Queen no longer trusted the word of *soldiers* that had served under Satsuki's command. If she failed to return the handpicked attendants to the castle in one piece, Ragyou's faith in the princess would be forfeit.

The blue-robed lady was hanging desperately onto her horse, unable to calm it; her uniform's cloth hat was lost in the wind, flattened by the pursuer's hooves. Satsuki's white destrier was stronger, faster in its gallop and with a perfectly balanced rider, but would still require some time to close the gap.

As dozens of commoner horses then began to spill over paths in the hills, as well as into the mouth of the valley behind behind them, Satsuki decided it was time she didn't have.

The ambushers who rode down from the sides would be busy navigating the terrain down, pouring through gentler paths in the slopes and avoiding drops and cliffs; even the finest archers or the odd casters that might be among them wouldn't dream of shooting while managing the grade of the hills in their descent. The crudely armed, ragtag soldiers - the *rebels* spilling down on foot behind them, running and sliding from the hills - would take longer to enter optimal range. As soon as the riders reached flat ground, Satsuki couldn't be certain how quickly they would shoot at any in her party.

A part of the insurrection even her sources hadn't tracked, and here it was, assembled in force, closing rapidly around the princess and

her troops. She clenched her teeth, sweeping out her hand.

"Disengage your stirrups!" Satsuki yelled to the attendant, with an innate apology for the horse.

The blue light of Frost arcana splashed out into the space around her, trailing behind for her speed - and snapped forward past her as a lance, a beam of speeding shards of ice that tore through the fleeing horse's hip.

The horse screamed, buckling about the severed muscle as it collapsed forward. Satsuki's warhorse was upon them in moments, nearing at the wounded left side - and as her horse passed Satsuki launched herself from the saddle, tackling the lady clear of her falling mount.

Satsuki turned, taking the landing back-first while bracing the attendant's head and back, shielding the woman from the fall; they landed on the right side of the injured horse and slid a short way, as it fell awkwardly to its left.

"P-princess…?" The bureaucrat sounded very scared.

Ignoring her, coughing momentarily for lost breath, Satsuki rolled so she was above her and stood. Her hand moved immediately for the Bakuzan on her back, but paused short of drawing it as she surveyed their rather adverse surroundings.

The princess raised empty hands, in a gesture of surrender for the scores of bows already trained on her. Distant thunder rumbled across the valley's walls.

"I had my suspicions." Satsuki's eyes easily picked out one who looked to hold importance in their ranks, from his positioning among the troops in the hills, the relative quality of his armor, and the way he held himself. "But I wanted to believe otherwise."

"You wanted to believe a half-sentiment of altruism would really be any help to the laborers of Kokutani?" the leader snarled. He shook his head. "You're clearly not your father, Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime."

"Evidently," Satsuki agreed flatly. "I am a woman. My hair is dark. And I stand alive and well-,"

"You want us to change that last bit?!"

"Should you fancy a bargaining chip, you wouldn't dare," Satsuki said, her hawklike gaze flicking about calmly. Their numbers were easily in the hundreds, as she gauged it, though only a few dozen were on horseback. "So many men, to seize myself and a small unit of soldiers?"

"We know you're a monster, Kiryuuin."

Satsuki quirked a brow. "Then shall we ensure this exchange remains bloodless as possible?"

"What do you propose?"

"My conditions for coming quietly. Allow my two attendants to ride away from here unscathed. They are noncombatants - bureaucrats, not warriors. The soldiers and I, you may detain."

"Princess!" the attendant huddled near Satsuki whispered up at her, shocked.

"The whispered-of 'resistance' that skulks in the shadows… Am I to understand it comprised of brutes who would slaughter the defenseless in cold blood?" Satsuki asked, expressionless. "Regardless of their noble standing, fell them and you're certainly no better than the monarchy you despise."

The leader waved. "Send them away. It makes no difference."

Satsuki whistled for her mare, which had stopped nearby after her dismounting. It returned at a trot, level-headed thing it was, and

waited patiently. Satsuki moved with slow deliberateness, taking care not to alarm the archers still trained on her. "M'lady," Satsuki said politely, offering a hand to the kneeling woman. With her composure, she could have been helping her up from a stumble in one of the castle's corridors, rather than sending her away from an ambush after arranging for her safety.

Eyes watery, the attendant took her hand.

"Wait," the leader called before Satsuki could help her onto the mare, and the princess obediently froze, looking expectantly to him. "You - take the greatsword off the princess's back, first. Throw it away from her."

"So thorough with one woman," Satsuki remarked. Then, to the attendant: "Go on, then."

The flustered lady crept behind her, unclipping the Bakuzan's sheathe, supporting its weight in both hands, and, with some effort, throwing the zweihander a safe few meters aside. At a nod from the rebel leader, Satsuki then helped the taller woman onto her horse. "Run as far as you can," she whispered toward the horse's flicking ears, and slapped its hip to get it started running.

She watched the army part to allow the warhorse and rider passage. The male attendant, though injured, was soon secure enough over the destrier's back behind her. Chaperoned by a few of the rebels, they escaped the mouth of the valley, and cantered off into the cloudy horizon beyond.

Satsuki's soldiers had been overtaken by platoons of rebels who had hidden in the hills and flanked around into the mouth of the valley behind them. The paltry force's number were already disarmed and bound. But the four she'd sent to scout were nowhere to be seen; if they were not out in view and dangled as hostages like the others, she supposed, there was a fair chance they already lay dead.

So the rebels had come in force, and she could only assume they were cutting down soldiers of the Crown without hesitation. The ambush had been heavily, if quickly, premeditated; for their hatred of the terrible Junpakko, they were prepared to instigate outright war in such a way as this.

That made them dangerous. The bold resolve about their present behavior broadened the uncertainty, reduced the accuracy, with which Satsuki could predict their actions.

It was not out of the question that they would seek to kill her here.

The armor gave a subtle shiver against Satsuki, seeming to breathe. Junketsu was every bit as alert as she, an additional observer to their predicament.

No, she somehow realized, feeling it clench coldly, subtly, as if to tense. It did not simply observe attentively; it was seething.

Do even you possess some sense of loyalty? she wondered.

She didn't expect the answer, from a voice that seemed to rise faintly, sluggishly, from within.

Not 'loyalty' to you. ***Respect*** *for the strong.* ***Revulsion*** *for the weak.*

Satsuki almost wanted to laugh, but she kept her focus on a group of rebels who approached to close in a ring around her stationary person, blades and spears leveled her way. *I would not call hundreds of 'the weak' erroneous in their confidence over one of the strong. Normally…*

She might have heard a scoff.

Someone behind her took her upraised hands by the wrists, and she cooperated as he lowered them, binding them with rope tightly behind her back. A promising sign; they intended to capture her. It

would be a simpler matter to lull their guard with cooperation, and escape when an opportunity arose.

When her hands were securely bound, the leader before her nodded, lowering his spear; the others followed suit, and two held her by the upper arms. Satsuki was left only a moment of suspicion before the sensed the incoming bludgeon, and pain shattered across the back of her skull.

The world blackened, and returned, and she was thudding to her knees. The men who held her shoved her to the ground, pinning her with their weight upon her arms and back; she gasped and thrashed to little effect, turning her head to see, in shaking vision, someone handing the leader a heavy-bladed axe.

"May the gods bear witness," he said, voice echoing on the valley walls. "In the name of her victims, and in the name of revolution, I hereby sentence Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime, sole heir of the Radiant Dynasty's rotted throne, to *death!* "

A warlike roar arose from the throats of innumerable rebels, booming; Satsuki realized the men holding her still were clear of her head and neck, as the leader approached. He wasted no time in squaring up, in lifting the axe well overhead. His eyes were wide, but his rage fought to bury something else within him.

They *weren't* confident. For all their numbers, they were every moment terrified. They worked with rapidity, in fear that with anything less the living legend they trifled with would bare her fangs and snap back.

Satsuki silently commended their resolve as she spun open the spiritual valve that made her a vessel for the Worldflow.

Twin spears of ice erupted from the earth at her sides, skewering the two men who held her and carrying them meters into the air.

Satsuki rolled over sharply toward her would-be executioner, through a dematerializing pillar of ice, and the axe cracked down into stone where her neck had been. She kicked a boot up, and his grip on the lodged weapon served to help her crack his arm out of place.

A howl. Spears and swords lunging in, as she coiled her legs above her and sprang from her shoulders onto her feet. A weak link in the formation - Satsuki chose him as her target, twirled outside the thrust of his pike, and lunged with a snarl, ramming her still-aching skull into his head. He toppled backwards, stunned.

The princess leapt at a swordsman behind her before he could react, swinging around in an aerial kick that snapped into his neck with a crunch, dropping him in a sprawling heap. But Satsuki didn't even mind single targets long enough to watch where they fell; she dodged and ducked and kicked furiously, soon sending the surrounding men sailing in every direction, but never stayed in place for long.

The leader. Her eyes flickered, finding he had retreated in the crowd, gripping his arm, barking orders to the archers who hesitated to fire into the chaos. She clenched her teeth.

"Ryuu no Yousou!"

And she was a blur about the rebels between them, flowing around strike after belated strike until she launched from the earth in an elegant, spinning leap - her robes and braid coiling around briefly with the motion - and struck out like a flash of lightning. When her boot met his skull with the weight of the Aspect, his neck buckled and sharply gave, his head jolting around much farther than it was meant to with a wicked crack.

Terror rippled like an electric shock through the rebel forces as the leader fell flat. For a moment they wavered.

Then Satsuki dodged from the path of an arrow that thunked to the earth at her feet. More were fired, and she twisted and rolled and

leapt, hearing them stud the ground - or the other rebels - around her. Her senses drank it all in, frenzied movement, speed and sound and blood.

Each one of you wonders, with every move - Will this arrow I loose, will this stroke of my blade, be the one to make history? Lightning glinted fiercely upon blue eyes that stung with sweat, upon the white flash of bared teeth. *The answer is no.*

Knocking a sword from a man's hand and kicking out again, calling the Aspect at the last moment to cave a considerable portion of his ribcage. Tucking her head under his arm and upraising him, turning him, so that his body behind her shuddered with the thud of several arrows. Letting him fall away while sweeping the toe of her boot back in a graceful circle along the earth around her, and unleashing rapidly woven strands of the Worldflow as a solid ring of icicle spears that surged up in her defense, immediately cracking with arrows and spears. A moment to breathe, and she ducked and lunged for a new target the moment the frozen shield was hacked away.

I refuse to allow such a thing. So long as I have a destiny to fulfill… !

An arrow grazed her as she dodged a thrown spear. She avoided horses and stayed among the skirmishers, but the archers found some semblance of order in their panic, as a wall of dark arrows closed together on the space around her.

You will NOT so easily make history here today!!

A wild shout, and a bursting wave of power repelled them like a thrashing wind - and repelled the men and mounts who'd been around her, launching them into the air or bowling them from their feet.

Another wave of arrows, and she repeated. A third, too quickly - her force weakened, and the projectiles wobbled and clattered around her feet rather than being swatted away. She panted; her head still

throbbed. A fourth volley, and she twisted to dodge the handful of arrows that broke through her retaliatory ki burst unslowed.

She bolted to the side, and her loss of predictability took the archers a moment to adjust for. In that time she was kicking a man's sword back from a strike, the blade sparking from her armor boot as it turned; when the tip caught fast in his chainmail vest, he blinked in a moment of wide-eyed startlement, and maybe premature relief, before a second kick drove his hand on the hilt in with a squelch, punching the blade from his back.

A halberd swung from behind her, and Satsuki dropped under its arc while shoving toward the attacker, hacked his feet from under him with a sweep of her leg, and caught him on her back, where he served the following instant as a makeshift shield. But one incoming arrow among the several glanced off his armor and down into Satsuki's shoulder, deepening her scowl.

She's hit - she heard the words rumble from a number of mouths. Their morale inflated. The Junpakko could tire, she could be hit, she could feel pain, she could be felled.

With two fleeting uses of the Aspect, she bucked her dying shield a few feet upward and caught him with a momentous kick as he fell. The body slammed into the lunges of three oncoming spears, retaining enough momentum still to bowl down the three shocked rebels behind them.

The Aspect accelerated Satsuki's senses as an arrow drew near; she traced its path to the side of her skull, tilted her head back just enough to evade it - and snapped forward again, teeth seizing on its shaft. So she pivoted to swing its momentum around as it scraped to a splintering halt in her teeth, and she leapt with another surge of power to drive the arrowhead through an approaching spearwoman's throat. A second arrow, and with a similar routine she snagged and redirected it to deposit in another rebel's eye.

Her adversaries were hysterical, mad with panic. The Pure White Tiger - she's a monster, a beast in human skin. Even from a warrior bloodline, she defied all reason. She was no mere skilled martial artist; she was havoc to her foes. They had perhaps heard it in stories, but not quite believed or comprehended in such a way as they now were taught - that no human could move the way she did, could kill with the manner of smooth and unbridled ferocity she possessed.

She spun sharply, and an arrow sank into the knot of the strong cord binding her wrists behind her back as her feet scraped to a momentary halt.

A hundred hearts shuddered as, with a palpable flare of power, she stretched and snapped the damaged binding, arms extending powerfully to her sides.

They charged, because they didn't know at this point what else to do. Satsuki met them with quick and savage strikes, palms drilling stunning bursts of ki through their bodies or fists shattering their bones. She now channeled the utmost potential of all four limbs into the elimination of all who dared approach. But there were so many.

She disarmed a sword from an attacker, and the blade flashed about in her hands, the subsequent shower of crimson life marking yet another instant escalation of the princess's lethality. She discarded the sword in another man's chest to seamlessly dodge and grab for a spear, maneuvering it to tangle the opponent's arms and flip him away, and cracked the staff blindingly into several wrists and skulls before hurling the battered weapon's head into the gut of a leaping war-axe wielder, knocking him away. Another sword, another three dead, parry, slash, slash, dodge and lunge, leaving the blade in the third one's back. A dagger, two more, a sword, two, a pike, three. The rebels swarmed from all directions, but physically could not close in faster than she could kill. She could move in short bursts many times faster than anyone else, and she never paused.

As she knocked a sword from a man's hand, she began to throw a strike when she noticed a bulge in his vest, and a fuse his free hand had been sheltering from the wind and light rain.

Blast sticks, the type used in mines that couldn't employ enough Chaos mages to Rend the land safely.

She jumped back, but the blast battered her and the others immediately nearby. Her head swam, ringing ears reminding her of her probable concussion. For a heartbeat, she ceased attacking; for one instant, the pain of innumerable cuts and bruises, the protests of muscles that tightened and burned with overexertion, pressed acutely into her awareness. Her vision blurred, flickered.

Then she kicked a sword on the ground into her hand, and plunged it into the stomach of a weaponless giant who charged head-on.

He grabbed at her wrist even as blood sprang from his lips.

She had been off-balance, reeling, but he had still assumed - correctly - that he would be slain as he reached her. He had been prepared to grab her as he died, and his determined grip remained locked as he fell, weight dragging her downward.

The crossbow bolt that came from behind him must have been shot *before* he fell. It sped for the princess's throat, fewer than two strides from her by the time it entered her field of view. An archer had come to ground level, to shoot from among the chaos.

Satsuki lifted her head and raised her chest; the heavy bolt struck the lower side of her breastplate, barely denting Junketsu but punching the wind from her lungs. Sputtering, she flared the Aspect while pulling up the hand of the dying man who'd caught her wrist, bracing her other arm near his elbow and cracking his forearm open with a strike of her knee. The immense hand loosened, but she grabbed and swung him by the arm with a furious bellow, knocking back with horrific force the enemies who leaped for her back.

The Aspect faltered. An arrow struck into her armor from behind, jolting her forward. She stumbled, wheezing, and guarded her head, gritting her teeth as a hand axe cracked into a shielding forearm.

Satsuki yelled as the weapon withdrew, and she thrust out her arms, shoving too-close enemies back with a surge of strength. And they fell on her again as her power burned and fizzled out, one rebel thrusting a spear into her shoulder and driving her to the earth.

She couldn't rise before someone else's boot swung in where she fell, snapping her head aside and sending a spray of blood, flickering in her vision, spattering to the earth from her lips. Someone drove a knee into her elbow, holding it down, while someone else stomped viciously at her shoulder wound and head; her free arm locked protectively across her throat, but another man dropped to hold it in place, smothering, simply keeping it from moving in favor of attempting to uncover her throat. They thought she might still break free.

She couldn't.

Someone's name, called by one of the people holding her: go for the kill. Promptly a spear was thrust from above, ramming into her breastplate at her heart. Her legs jolted as much as they could at the impact, her breath wild as she fought mindlessly to thrash free, hardly shaking them.

The blade hadn't broken through. The rebel above her raised the spear high again, screaming as he threw his weight down into the strike. He was young. He couldn't have been older than the princess herself.

A third strike, furious, shaking. Satsuki couldn't remember how to make her lungs work anymore. Her body ached. Her armor had dented, cracked.

And time had drawn to a crawl.

Satsuki blinked as the spear began to drift upward again. But the world seemed distant; her consciousness had shifted.

And a smooth rumble of speech arose in her mind.

Thou'rt impressive, Junpakko. However profusely thou happenedest to bleed upon me in thy most unpromising *travail…*

The spear was almost poised to strike again, the reflections of a protracted flash of lightning dancing on chipped steel.

'Near a hundred silenced by thy claw…' A vicious, grumbling chuckle. *'Thou dost battle magnificently. The sacrifices thou'st heaped so generously upon thy battlefield shall suffice.'*

What are you saying?

'In short, my strength hath returned, Kiryuuin, for thou'rt indeed a wielder of powers formidable, a most proper commander of fear. After an era of slumber, my rekindling is nigh, for she who dareth light the flame. Wilt thou nourish me with the blood of thine enemies, infuse me with thy deepest wrath? So standeth the stagnant heart of our covenant, a heart yet awaiting its first beat. Let us sow despair within each bosom, mete out devastation upon their vulgar ranks; or, if thou desirest not *to hold mine ample strength, but to spurn my generosity, let thee perish here. Thy choice awaits, daughter of Kiryuuin.'*

The spear thrust down, and Satsuki chose.

Her eyes grew as a bolt of pain shattered not through her heart but her wrist, spilling and leeching hot blood with ravenous fervor. Junketsu shimmered white, emitting an unearthly shrill.

It was like an explosion, throwing everyone and everything away for dozens of meters around. Satsuki found herself upright again, afloat in a sea of white light, hair dancing calmly. She was alone and bare, but for Junketsu's presence around her.

And more importantly, its strength. Satsuki's look was stern, her voice low, as the pact unfolded in her heart; her body seemed to reinvigorate with every word she spoke.

"I shall steep thee in the blood of my foes, infuse thee with my deepest wrath."

A swirling phantom took form, a beast of amorphous light arcing skyward, beating ethereal wings with a resounding screech, and diving for her again. Perhaps in Satsuki's mind's eye alone, in flickering moments the soul's true form shone clear - that of a white-scaled dragon furious and proud, a silver-blue mane rippling wildly down its back. Its ancient maw spread wide, crimson eyes frenzied with centuries of starvation. Unwavering, Satsuki raised her bleeding arm overhead.

"On this offering of lifeblood, the seal of our covenant, to flood through its nascent heart - I light thy flame, and command thee to awaken!"

The white light crashed inward, folding around Satsuki's strong frame and taking a shape distinct from that of dormant form of the armor called Junketsu. Satsuki curled inward and bared her teeth with a growl, struggling to withstand the sudden flux of power rushing hotly through her, sparking and steaming in the air.

'With thy blood as sacrament…'

"Dragonsoul Override!" Satsuki roared, clenching her fists and throwing back her head as she straightened again. *"Kamui Junketsu!!"*

[GODPLATE JUNKETSU]

The armor solidified against her, and a thin, lingering shell of light was webbed in cracks before scattering from its surface like so many shards of glass.

The figure that remained stood tall, back straight and chin inclined as she stretched and clenched one hand's gloved fingers, testing. Junketsu was significantly bulkier than it had been - now a full and proud suit of silver-white armor trimmed with accents of blue, but lighter than cloth to its wearer's new strength. A solid breastplate protected Satsuki's chest, and a neatly layered series of abdominal plates, not altogether unlike the underbelly of a dragon, cascaded sleekly from below it to extend past her groin. The shoulders of the suit were prominent, pauldrons protruding upward in two wicked, towering spikes; on their inner sides, before Satsuki's collarbone, sat the clasps that held in place a white ruff behind her neck, from which a deep blue mantle trailed to about her feet.

A *menpou* cradled her jaw and the lower portion of her face, and her head supported an elegant white *kabuto* with a crest of horns, secured by a cord below her chin. A protective visor jutted above her forehead, framed by a semblance of two overhanging fangs, and sweeping scarlet markings were etched upon the skin below her eyes, as warpaint. Her fist clenched smoothly once more.

"'Regalia so glorious, the gods themselves would envy its wearer,' was it…?" Satsuki looked up from the armor, not having forgotten she stood among some hundreds of men and women after her life. But the power coursing through her was unquestionable. It rendered mere numbers meaningless, and left little doubt that if she so chose to unleash it upon them, this would be no battle, but a slaughter.

Two long stripes of blue along the front of the pauldron spikes split, warping sharply outward along their surfaces to unveil the likeness of two ominous, burning red eyes.

Satsuki's face was severe, her posture brimming with cold confidence, as she raised her voice for the stunned onlookers. "I'm

sorry to say - it would appear I'm not fated to perish in such a place as this."

~ ~

The Black Valley, Part I

[img: http://orig08.deviantart.net/7453/f/2017/197/4/1/dragonsoul_override_satsuki_color_by_hinata0321-dbghz6g.png]

End

The Black Valley, Part II

Chapter 10: The Black Valley, Part II

-"Be it a lord descended from the heavens or the vilest demon to claw its way forth from the pits of hell, I will crush underfoot ANYTHING that DARES stand in the path of my ambition!!"-

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Reminder that you can find all artwork for this story (as well as linearts, WIPs, etc.) on my art sideblog **here**. But if you ever just want to look at an in-chapter illustration in more detail, you can right click and 'view image' to see the source's full size; most are uploaded as a larger source, and scaled down in-chapter.

Note that this chapter and the previous were posted only a week apart! Be sure you've already read ch9, 'The Black Valley, Part I,' before coming here :)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Ten \ The Black Valley, Part II

One archer, the quickest to recover from her shock, was bold enough to send an arrow toward the princess.

Satsuki knew intuitively how ineffectual the iron arrowhead would be. Accordingly, the projectile shattered against Junketsu above her ribcage, not swaying the wearer an inch. Even the impact was trifling, distributed and muted at the armor's surface.

"So this is your power, Junketsu…" The princess watched a presumably brave fellow rush her, watched his sword crack in pieces as it met her chest. The sturdy dragonbone plate was such as to liken the finest steel to glass, cleaving it grain by grain from its point of contact with Junketsu's surface. Her arm swept out as the man tried to step back, and a stronger shockwave than Satsuki had anticipated sprang forth. It launched him and all in a cone behind him backwards, in a blast of quickly rising wind and dust that roared across and up the side of the valley before it petered out. "Magnificent!"

'Magnificent, this tragic state my body is in? Plates and bones covereth thee as armor; scaled leather hath been wrought of nigh impregnable hide. My glorious mane!' it moaned, aghast. *'Woven to* cloth *to serve as decoration upon thy back! 'Tis naught but a lamentable* mockery *of my splendor. And yet… if so cradling thy vessel alloweth mine indulgence in the havoc of war, and the taste of bloodshed long forgot, I shan't long grieve.'* A scoff. *'Even broken down this way, what staunch vitality I lend thy fragile, human frame. Prithee disappoint me not, Kiryuuin whelp.'*

Satsuki's eyes shifted from the wounded and disoriented rebels scattered in the settling dust on the slope. In moments her eyes found among her anxious adversaries a particular one, some forty strides away - and she was before him, retrieving the Bakuzan from his hands. He blinked with a start, and a curt palm heel strike to the sternum sent him flying back, smacking into a stone and crumpling senseless to the ground.

"Archers, ready!" another voice screamed, and Satsuki noted the dozens of arrows hurriedly training on her. "Fire!"

The princess didn't so much as lift a hand, but instead opened herself to a tremendous surge of the Worldflow across her circuits, taking on more power than she ever would have handled so comfortably before.

Arrows sparked and shattered about her, dropped more easily than so many flies. She finished her weaving, and beams of rapidly solidifying power shot from her body in all directions, as if to nearly trace each arrow's path. Dozens of long, fine lances of ice lodged into stone or dirt, each one inches shy of a startled archer. Many yelped or stumbled away in bewilderment; some stood stock still as their powerlessness, in the ease with which they could already have been slain, dawned upon them. Satsuki had avoided their bodies, yet struck their hearts. Junketsu rumbled amusedly at their terror, but thirsted for more than that.

'Why spare them?' the restless soul growled impatiently, its voice like a crackle of flames.

Satsuki raised her head and her voice, paying it no heed. "I strongly advise you cease your attack," she declared, a stern warning. She held up a hand in a gesture toward the armor. "You lot will make a poor first offering to my Junketsu."

'Am I to be flattered?' It gave a scoff. *'We agreed to no such acts of mercy, Junpakko. If mine assistance thou requirest, thou shalt withhold me* ***not*** *from delivering their deserv'ed slaughter.'*

The princess felt her hand tighten involuntarily on the Bakuzan's hilt; the sword began to rise, as the beast's urge to spill blood simmered hotly in her skull. She swatted back the armor's goading pull on her, harsh, and focused on the enemies around her again.

One man raised his sword and charged at her, face red with indignant rage. "Murderer! You think we'll have their deaths be in vain-?!"

He blinked as his target vanished. Satsuki's feet touched down ten meters from his back, and she flicked her zweihander clean in a strong sweep without turning to face him again.

However unfortunate, it was a simple fact that his comrades' deaths were already in vain; the rebels' chance to fulfill their mission had

passed the moment Junketsu had awakened. With this, the opponent they'd already spent some hundred soldiers whittling down had unlocked, in a single tremendous bound, powers even she would never have predicted.

The man's forearms split cleanly along a plane, beginning to fall away with the sword an instant before his neck opened in a shower of blood.

Understand this. Satsuki's eyes were severe as she lifted the Bakuzan to a ready stance. *I don't need your 'help.' I need a weapon that bends to my will.*

"This is your final warning!" Satsuki shouted, commanding an authoritative boom that resounded on the valley walls. "You fought well, and many demonstrated their resolve to place your cause before their very lives! I find this no trivial feat. But you no longer have the slightest hope of besting me! To continue now is to render your efforts truly meaningless! Lay down your weapons, pledge your loyalty to me, or your lives WILL be forfeit!!"

"Demon!" someone snarled, running toward her. An impetus - a single one to break a spell of stillness, to tear from their cowering ranks, to traverse and nullify the mental barricade that held them collectively at bay. So like waters that collapsed inward upon the space around the princess, intent to swallow and crush, waves of the rebels broke into motion. They did so to Junketsu's snide amusement.

Satsuki shut her eyes at its snickering. *Alas, if the fools will not be helped, so be it.*

"Tora no Yousou!" she roared, setting power ablaze in the air around her. Currents of energy set the blue trim of the armor electrically bright, and Satsuki's perception was enhanced to a degree she'd never approached. The fighters closing toward her moved in slow motion beneath her eyes, shouts of war stretching from open

mouths, every desperate face clear enough to be observed in crisp detail down to the last pores, stray hairs, and beads of sweat.

Satsuki drifted from where she stood, supremely focused, afterimages trailing the flow of the featherlight Bakuzan in her hands. They might as well have been standing still.

She materialized before her soldiers near the mouth of the valley, relinquishing the Aspect. The shadow of her blade was realized a heartbeat later. In a wild zigzag, in dizzying succession, some three dozen rebels amid the horde she'd traversed were falling in well more than three dozen pieces to the earth, splatterpainting their allies with gore.

The handful of the rebels who'd been hanging back near Satsuki's soldiers crumbled in similar fashion, emitting a quickly-settling mist. In almost the same moment, the rope bonds on one of Satsuki's men split neatly from his wrists.

"Use your knife. Help the others," she ordered curtly, and the surprised man yelped an answer, drawing a dagger as another awed soldier held out his bound hands.

Satsuki walked to stand before the hostage troops, observing the remaining rebels' present disarray. At last, they were shattered in spirit; but the display of brutality that had so precisely stripped their will had inevitably ensured they could never willingly, or usefully, serve her. A minority avowed a mad desperation to fight, blind in their hope and their rage and their numbers, and others were screaming that they could only flee. Any crystallized semblance of order they'd retained had been fragmented, broken down beyond repair. Truly, they were poorly trained. But however many strong, they were but the common masses: simple to mold, simple to break down to nothing again.

"What a waste," Satsuki breathed, walking toward them.

Seeing her move, the nearest began to peel from their positions and flee further into the valley. Satsuki's system breathed in the Worldflow once more, extracting Holy arcana from its mixture, amassing and coiling it rapidly within her circuits.

Junketsu rumbled in fascination, evidently no longer cross with her. The beast inhabiting her armor was so easily placated by a promise of bloodshed, it was pathetic.

'A blow of the utmost force, perchance…?' It was almost taunting, as it spoke; it knew Satsuki's decision was already set, as surely as the arcana concentrating rapidly within her. *'Good, good! What a fine lump of flesh I adorn! Go forth, and slaughter all wouldst* ***dare*** *to raise arms against thee, Junpakko!!'*

The princess was elevating the sacred zweihander in both hands, eyes bright with her channeling but hard as steel. Whorls of white light floated lazily around the Bakuzan, charging and distorting the air.

"This blade grows stronger with each life it takes," Satsuki said, expressionless as her voice echoed with power. "One way or another, you shall become my strength."

The sky and the vicinity darkened, leaving the now-whitened Bakuzan absolutely blinding. Flying gusts of rain were illuminated, given elaborate form about and within a pillar of light that projected skyward from where Satsuki stood. The rebels now fled en masse, panicked bodies scraping past stones, scrambling and slipping along the valley walls, or shoving and slamming past those too scared to look away.

Satsuki tipped the zweihander back and stepped forward. She assumed the Aspect of the Tiger for one crisp moment as she sealed the fate of every one of them in the smooth downward stroke of her blade.

"SUNDERING FLARE!"

The blast engulfed the valley, whitening its floor and walls; the light that overtook it raced along every surface, grinding and surging onward like a flash flood of absurd volume and horrific speed. Satsuki's hair danced back from the edge of her helm; her boots had crunched into the stone underfoot when she'd swung. Her eyes remained forward on the expanse of raging, roaring light, unblinking until, in several seconds, the blast began to subside.

When it did, she looked upon a valley littered only with rubble, and corpses - the hundreds she'd slain in a single stroke.

"Your… Your Highness is incredible," a stunned soldier said, at Satsuki's back. She turned to see those of her unit on the ground. They were overall several meters from where they'd been - overturned by the backlash of her attack, huddled to the ground and hesitant, or fearful, to rise.

Satsuki dispelled the helm of Junketsu before she realized she knew how; some of the soldiers started as it whitened and vanished in a smooth scattering of light, leaving her hair, now bound high in a long tail, to roll down at her back. The princess shut her eyes and sighed.

"Come… let us locate the queen's attendants, and return home."

"The mining town…?" one of her soldiers began uncertainly, before biting her lip at the question.

Satsuki shook her head. "People will shortly enough see what has happened here, and the laborers who weren't in that rebel force will work themselves ragged in the coming days, in a plea for the mercy they won't receive. Doubtless upon my report the queen will order the entire settlement purged, but such is not our task today."

As the soldiers were standing, Satsuki looked back to the expanse of corpses. She felt something, yes. The sentiment was simply not enough to leave a discernible mark on her solemn expression, not remotely enough to lead her to second-guess her choices.

[img:
http://orig11.deviantart.net/6a49/f/2017/205/1/3/ryuusatsjun_nohelmet_by_hinata0321-dbhjk3u.png]

Her eyes narrowed at the sight of a single figure some hundred meters away, charred armor crumbling but body stiffly upright amid the sea of prone bodies around it.

"What *is* that…?" One of the soldiers murmured, following Satsuki's gaze.

The crooked figure in the distance slowly relaxed, straightened, and raised his head, revealing burning, strikingly golden eyes to the onlookers.

Satsuki inhaled sharply.

"Run!" she shouted, a moment before a shockwave buffeted them all. The rebel survivor was shrouded in an aura of unearthly light, holding out his hand as an elaborate, immense halberd materialized smoothly in the air at his side, locking in his grasp.

The soldiers gawked; they would have heard stories like anyone, but few humans ever witnessed such a thing.

"A god!" one screeched. "A *god* descends to the battlefield!!"

"I said, RUN!" Satsuki snapped, sword at the ready, eyes wide in fury as she turned her head to them.

She saw the horror begin to overtake their faces, felt a prickling on the back of her neck - and faced forward again just as she was receiving the blow of a colossal battleaxe squarely to her breastplate.

The force was bewildering; Satsuki lost her breath in a strident bark, and felt her every bone rattle under a wave of force as she was swung a short way and launched into a valley wall. Junketsu was

emitting a gurgling scream as the rock face crushed inward behind them - audibly, she realized, amid her general bafflement as she toppled to the ground. She lurched and coughed, blood streaking acidly from her lips, but as she groped shakily about her chest she found only a shallow gouge impressed into the armor, already beginning to restore. The damage lay in blunt force alone, when such a blow would likely have cleaved her old armor, and her in it, in two.

She raised her head, watching as the new arrival considered her from where she'd been some thirty strides away. The body was perfectly ordinary - a dark-haired young man, tall and lean in build, his clothes and plain leather cuirass and vambraces tattered. But his expression was contemplative, his eyes burning with the unnatural glint of a man quite literally possessed. Unconcerned with the wary soldiers who backed away from him, he leveled his weapon at Satsuki - a heavy-bladed halberd that an average man's strength would never have so easily hefted.

"Prithee - do not take this personally, Kiryuuin Satsuki."

Satsuki gathered her breath, rising sorely and stepping from the wall in a defensive stance, kicking a bit of rubble from her feet. She'd lost hold of the Bakuzan when she'd been struck. "Intervening in the affairs of mortals? Or attacking before declaring your intentions? Are not these both unsavory behaviors for such a being - acts most Heavenly Ones frown upon?"

"You grow perhaps a mite too dangerous," the Intervener persisted, making his vessel's face smile gently. "You fight valorously, but of the many who observed your combat today, I am not alone in growing unsettled. To witness a woman who so excels at grasping strength, she would not balk to awaken even that which should *never* be infringed upon… Unfortunate, but it is not only yourself that arouses concern, either. With the present risks as they stand, plenty of our number… would not quite despair at seeing the only heir of the Kiryuuin's dynasty vanish from this plane. The gods do not love your bloodline as fiercely as the queen would purport, I'm afraid."

"Are you not bound by rules? How have *I* so incurred the gods' ire, as to warrant your arrival now?"

"Though we seek to limit our meddling in mortal affairs, you might be surprised how simple it is to accrue a few strikes, with the right - or wrong - missteps. Your mother takes care to hide her atrocities from our gaze, but you… Well, only recently you behaved dishonorably in a duel, and today you fully awaken the unearthly powers of a construct drawn by necromantic arts to the mortal realm."

Satsuki's brow rose, shortly nonplussed. Junketsu offered in lieu of explanation the mental equivalent of a shrug, and the princess internally swore. *Nui, you festering piece of two-tongued, maggot-ridden…*

"You meddle in powers no god or mortal should," he said, fixing his gaze on Junketsu's gleaming eyes. "I come here within my rights, as a counterforce impelled to act in correction… before you, Princess, become yet another instrument to the *destruction* your mother so foolishly beckons. So we stand," the Intervener declared, lifting the Bakuzan in hand. After inspecting it for a moment he tossed it Satsuki's way, in a high arc. "Defend yourself, if you will."

'Wait,' Junketsu advised, feeling Satsuki's muscles tense.

She flung an immediate shard of ice; the Intervener's hand flashed up, hacking it from the air before his chest as he stepped backward with a scowl of surprise. In that time, Satsuki had leapt to the valley wall, at a spot high enough that the god on the ground and the Bakuzan at the peak of its flight were aligned in her view. She shoved in a straight shot for her foe, in one motion drawing the blade from the air and swinging it in a ferocious slash.

BOOM!!

The ground shattered around them. The greatsword was locked between the blade and spearlike spike of a halberd positioned to block. The Intervener smiled sorrowfully at her, amused.

"Close one, that was. It truly shall be a shame…"

"Our goals might not so greatly differ," Satsuki persisted, but to no avail. The Intervener grit his teeth. Then the ground quaked at their feet, and energy sparked across the vessel's skin before his body was warped - growing a sudden half-meter taller, with broadness to match, as lean muscles swelled across his form with a grotesque crackle of sinew.

A curt move, and Satsuki's stance was broken, her sword forced back so sharply its edge began to bite into the armor of her shoulder. She sidestepped a thrust of the halberd and tried to get her distance, but her opponent handled his weapon like the wind, for all it remained longer in full than he was tall. The god drew back and threw a vicious swing, a blinding horizontal arc that collided with the blocking Bakuzan to send Satsuki sailing behind it.

She landed with a grunt, rolling several times before ramming the sword into the earth, so it slowed her until she slid to a crouching halt. She looked up; the god had launched himself in a ground-shaking leap of pursuit. Dark hair rippled like a flame in the wind as he plunged toward her with a roar, smashing the halberd down. Satsuki evaded narrowly, but a wave of concussive force tossed her into the air as the earth shattered under the blow.

Landing on her feet, she lunged and swung to connect the Bakuzan with his back.

The strike was square, but the wound was shallow - a slice running no deeper than a centimeter into his flesh. Satsuki's eyes grew, and she ducked under a whistling sweep of the great axe, dodging and deflecting two more gusting strikes thrown as he stepped toward her and she stepped back. She staggered, and as another strike came, she unleashed a burst of ki that jolted her backward with the force required to reverse the halberd's swing.

She was out of breath, but she noticed the halberd slipping from a slackening grip with its deflection. The Intervener scowled, throwing

a kick that snapped Satsuki's head aside and sent her spinning away.

On landing she turned and ran, rushing behind a large rocky outcrop. Crouching, not yet detecting pursuit, she wiped blood from her lips and blinked to clear her head. Her heart raced. Junketsu had at some point rematerialized the helmet, a fact she was now grateful for.

'However long the time that passeth, the gods of this land so relish in combat…' Junketsu gave a rumble of indignation. *'But this one, a mere Lesser among the Heavenly ranks - in another era, I did vanquish such with ease! Yet thou seemst here to stand outmatched, Junpakko.'*

"I failed to notice," Satsuki muttered dryly. Junketsu produced a small clicking sound, unamused.

'Pray tell - art royals in this era read on the subject, or dost thou know of legends alone?'

"The gods are attentive toward battlefields - toward the mortal flaw of engaging in war," Satsuki said. "In rare circumstances, they are even known to seek to participate, to quell the fighting. But they can only interact with our world so directly by inhabiting a corporeal vessel, albeit temporarily shedding many of their powers in doing so."

A hum of approval. *'In eras of chaos past, the gods did grow* exceedingly *prone to intervention; so the divine did war alongside armies men - some for mortal causes, some for having grown too fond of the thrill and developed the 'flaw' in themselves. God fought god in ever-increasing numbers, to catastrophic result. The fateful balance of worlds spun near out of control. When the fighting did cease, the gods laid down rules to bind their own hands.'* The rumble that followed held something of humor. *'I am reborn into quite a time, indeed.'*

"'Tis not simply you or I that impelled an Intervener to appear," Satsuki gathered. "We in the kingdom of today stand upon a great crux in history, upon something so consequential it tempted one to step in despite the risks - is that what you're saying-?"

The princess lunged away from the stone as it burst to pieces where she'd been, a halberd crashing explosively through from the other side. She rolled in her landing and faced her foe, holding Bakuzan before her as the Intervener stared her down.

Junketsu's tone was almost reflective, somberly calm.

'Tell me, Princess… can your sword slay a god?'

Satsuki shifted her weight, her gaze steady as the Intervener drew unhurriedly nearer again. *It slew dragons, in centuries past.*

A rough sound. *'Then it possesseth a chance, yet. 'Twas a wonder it so much as broke the skin of a body empowered by divine inhabitance… but invulnerable he ist not, within human flesh. Should the corporeal vessel perish prior to the declared task's completion, the pesky god perisheth with it.'*

The only Arcanum I can bind to my blade is Holy; you've already seen my deadliest technique, Satsuki responded. *Holy arcana burn upon what darkness is present in any human or fiend. They won't harm, won't so much as faze, a god.*

'A god incorruptible wouldst ne'er have fallen hither for such a task,' Junketsu growled, confident. *'Mine own affinity proves fortuitous. I may assist thee, if thou wilt manage one small part…'*

Satsuki listened to it, circling slowly with the Intervener from a few strides apart. Finally, she grinned.

"Does something amuse you?" the god inquired, his visage grim. "Or are you simply prepared to abandon your scrambling flight, and greet your fate honorably, whatever it may be?"

"These words, from cowardly gods who would trample over history at their pleasing?" Satsuki asked. "You presume to stand in the path of my ambition as if it were no consequential thing. Your error was in thinking Kiryuuin Satsuki would be the simplest link in this world's chains of fate to knock out of place."

"We give you your 'destinies.' Regrettably or not, we reserve the right to take them away."

Satsuki's brow furrowed above eyes narrow with darkly brewing furor. "I am Kiryuuin Satsuki, first princess of the eternal kingdom of Honnouji, and heir to the Radiant Dynasty's throne. Let us see then, shall we? How powerful my destiny has grown."

When he leapt for her, Satsuki moved in kind.

"RYUU NO YOUSOU!"

Her accelerating senses kicked into overdrive as they neared, the Bakuzan trailing in her hands, the axe swinging for her side.

She ducked and spun gracefully, slashing neatly upward across the tendons of his forearm as the halberd passed.

His grip weakened, and his eyes grew as the princess stepped to thrust the Bakuzan for his heart.

And he lunged in, slipping under the path of the sword to smash a fist into Satsuki's gut.

The blow had been stunningly swift, unencumbered by the weight of the halberd; the strength behind it buckled Junketsu's plates. Satsuki grimaced, doubling over as a spray of spittle burst from her throat. The Bakuzan tipped from slackening fingers.

Even as she slumped, as her knees started to give, Satsuki grabbed hold of his arm. Her jaw was set, her wide eyes murderously fierce.

"Fear not…" the Intervener sighed. "I'll ensure your passage to the After is swift… Hm?"

"NOW!" Satsuki cried, and her hands and arms were suddenly alive with a foul glow of writhing darkness.

'Corrupting Touch!' Junketsu hissed, and the Intervener jolted straight, twisting away in revulsion as a surge of dark power snapped into him like an electric shock.

He withdrew his arm with a scowl, prying off Satsuki's hold and swatting her away with a quick open hand, as if he feared to touch her again. But the damage had been done; dark, diseased light burned upon his skin, and he beheld his hands in horror before stepping back uncertainly, batting and clawing with his fingers at crawling black embers of defilement on his arm and chest.

Vanity, grief, clouded in his eyes - and rage, that he would be twisted by such a thing. He looked up, furious and distraught, eyes unfocused and tendons standing out in his neck.

"What have you-?!"

But the blood-stained princess, hunched in her stance like some vicious, predatory beast, had already poised upright in her hands a blade that shone white, amplifying the power that spiraled down around her.

"*SUNDERING FLARE!* "

The blast ran him through at point blank, a burning and severing wave of light that wrought devastation on every corrupted fiber of his being.

Satsuki panted as she studied the charred, cracked and bleeding figure left standing rigidly before her.

The Intervener's gaping jaw twitched. Utter horror was stark in his expression as he beheld the warrior before him. He tried to reach out, focus fading in and out of the shrunken, pinprick pupils of dim golden eyes.

"I-I… gave y-you… your very *name*… Y-you have n-no… *power* to… !"

The thought was truncated by the Bakuzan in his heart. The princess had lunged into him with the thrust, and now drove him to the earth beneath her blade, flaring cape settling behind her again.

"No power to oppose you?" Satsuki echoed with chilled severity, face set in an impassive frown. "I have the *right* to shape this world. You, who cannot appreciate life and death as do mortals, bear *no such privilege* before me. Do you fail even to recognize the folly of your intervention? Of course I overcame you."

"*Monster*…"

Satsuki's grip adjusted on the Bakuzan's hilt. Her eyes were ice, cold enough to sear. "O craven lord of the heavens… For all your power, I will *never* be felled by gods who can only face me while ever balking at the risks - *gods* who would for centuries decline to shape this crumbling world for the fear of subjecting themselves to the vulnerability of human form."

She shoved down with a final surge of strength. A rough crunch of parting meat and bone, and the man shuddered, and was still. Golden light scattered from his mouth and dulling eyes, and the air shook in a heavy throb as the Bakuzan glinted fleetingly, and darkened again.

Satsuki pulled her sword from the vessel's chest, watching the divine halberd in his hand shimmer and fade. She cast blood from the Bakuzan, only to promptly fall to her knees at the man's side, planting the blade in the earth with her weight leaning upon it. She gasped for breath, feeling both pathetically weak and immensely

strong as Junketsu briefly seemed to liquefy and reshape around her, settling in its dormant form.

Muscle and skin tingled, simmering with steady, raw pain about her earlier wounds. Her head swam. The Bakuzan - it would be now even mightier than before. She could destroy anything in her path. This was what her years of work had amounted to - this power she alone was worthy of, and now bore as her own.

"G… Godslayer!" a man hailed.

"Satsuki-hime, the Godslayer!"

The soldiers began to hurrah excitedly, to cheer her victory, awed and relieved for the princess's safety. Satsuki almost wanted to laugh. She had erased hundreds of souls not so different from theirs here today. The dead had simply chosen the wrong side. God, man, and beast - all were now equal, among those who would oppose her.

Humans - commoners, nobles, mages, *monarchs*, it made no difference any longer. It had been her mother's mistake to place such a weapon as Junketsu in Satsuki's hands. She pressed a hand to her face, now only half resisting the impulse to laugh aloud at the absurdity of it all.

What were these men and women, now? They would die in an instant if ever they stood against her. She wore the strongest armor, held the sharpest blade. A malicious smirk worked across her weary face, glinting foully in her eyes. She was unstoppable. She *didn't* need them; for all the time she'd spent crafting armies, it suddenly happened that she didn't need anyone.

Her head lifted slightly, and for one moment she looked introspectively upon herself, abrupt in her bewilderment.

She understood, too late, as she saw the darkness creeping calmly from about her wrist.

"No-!"

'Corrupting Touch.'

It went through her in a pulse, a cold heartbeat that shuddered across her body as a whole. Then the darkness burned and settled into her skin, consuming like fire until she feared her flesh would blacken and drip from the bones. Her mouth fell open as her fingers twitched, their movement experimental.

*-"Yet another instrument to the **destruction** your mother so foolishly beckons…"-*

Suddenly she was like the rebel, the hunk of flesh strung up to the will of some separate force. The darkness faded, but the spell's hold remained.

'Flattered am I, that thou camest to trust me at long last. Or didst thou briefly forget not *to trust me?'* A low, grating chortle stirred in her throat. *'The mighty hunter groweth weak in the moment she perceiveth no threat in the world.'*

You… Junketsu, you snake… !

'A thousand apologies, fierce Junpakko. Her Majesty the Queen did impressively tame and bind my will, prior entrusting me to thy care.'

~ ~

The Black Valley, Part II

End

City of Masks

Chapter 11: City of Masks

Been meaning to say this for several chapters now, but as a heads-up, I'm thinking of shortening my username soon. I chose the current name without thinking about it, wanted to change it about five minutes later, and found that AO3 didn't allow changes at the time. But it looks like it's a feature now?

WARNINGS this chapter: Implied sexual abuse, in terms of Ragyou being Ragyou

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(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Eleven \ City of Masks

When Ryuuko opened her door, she took one look at the mutt seated eagerly on the other side, and the eye beaming up at her, and fell to her knees to hold him around the shoulders.

The flicking of his tail slowed and promptly stopped, excitement fading and ears twitching back with wide-eyed concern as the woman buried her face in the side of his neck, shoulders shaking and moisture snuffling in her nose. She'd been holding it in, numb. The council had mercifully let her go so they could discuss their war, and the whole walk back, she'd been holding in the vulnerability she didn't trust people to see.

"Senketsu?" she gasped in a minute, voice high. "People are *awful* ."

With a quiet sound, he rested his head patiently on the hunched woman's shoulder.

Ryuu was in fact only permitted to curl up on her couch for an hour before Senketsu gave a whine. He prodded the back of her shoulder with his nose, then the crown of his skull, then sat back on his haunches to push at her with paws.

When she pretended to be asleep, he retreated and then hopped onto the couch - large feet holding him awkwardly in the little available space between Ryuu and the backrest as he nuzzled at her face, whining again.

"Quit it!" she said finally, pushing his side so that he began to overbalance, and jumped to the floor again. "Don't be an arse…"

She felt her shirtneck pulling with a grip on its collar, and felt a damp nose brush the back of her neck before she was lugged off the couch, a surprised curse spitting from her lips.

She couldn't scowl for long at the hound that batted his eye innocuously above her, tongue lolling to one side of his grin. Not taunting or laughing for his prank, but just happy she was there. Sometimes she didn't feel she deserved that look, even if Senketsu would have argued otherwise.

He considered her a good deal stronger than she felt.

Ryuu groaned, sitting up and scratching his ears. "… You up for a little walk?" she asked, looking away from a lopsided dog-smile. The words were not apologetic, but her tone gave her away.

A sudden lick across her face, and she spat and wiped slobber away with a laugh.

Satsuki found herself drowning.

She coughed, ejecting her lung capacity in a bubbling spray from her nose and mouth. She was wearing armor - it was too heavy, yet she would never manage to remove it. Oceanic black depths stretched disorientingly in all directions, but she flailed only a moment longer before, eyes madly fierce, she swam to chase the bubbles that floated away. She knew no aiding hands would find her within such depths as these. Nothing would lift her up but her own strength.

There was already water in her lungs; her limbs were leaden, dragging her down. But her will to live set her kicking and clawing indefatigably onward, upward, toward a clearer blue and the light of the sun, bursting with a strangled yell to the surface.

She slumped with a clanking splatter onto smooth stone, heaving out fluid and gasping for air. Blinking, pushing sodden bangs from her eyes, she rapidly took stock of her surroundings - and started upon seeing that a pitifully hunched young girl sat nearby on the step, eyes disconsolately downcast, a dark braid trailing down between her bare shoulder blades.

The sun - the sun had been replaced by a number of soft magelights, covering the area in a dim, slowly shifting yellow glow. The ground wasn’t natural; the edge Satsuki clung to was much too perfect, a neatly hewn edge that dropped to bound the warm water as a wall. She sat on steps that faded downward into the pool. Steps, where moments ago there had been no more than the fathomless sea.

Hearing footfalls, Satsuki pulled herself fully from the water - and tumbled over an edge, falling, falling from over a balustrade, wide-eyed and impotent as the garden below rushed to meet her.

She thudded to the floor of a room and rolled automatically to her feet, heart racing, eyes casting about in confusion.

The same small girl stood a short way before her, now wearing a pastel-colored, silken dress - child's clothes finer in quality than any fabric most commoners would ever touch, let alone don. Satsuki

feared she would look deranged, but the child was not frightened by her arrival. In fact, as before, the girl somehow did not seem to notice her at all. Eyes that seemed far too cold for her age remained trained on the room's lush carpet, lips wrinkled with tangling thoughts as she waited, hands balled at her sides.

She waited, Satsuki knew, for someone who had told her 'I'll be right back' - someone the child never wanted to come back. But how Satsuki knew such things about her, she could not have said.

A laugh, from the hazy boundary of the room. "You're supposed to undress, dear. You know this, don't you? Or did you forget?"

The tone was pleasant, but held an unmistakable threat. The speaker had offered the girl a chance to correct herself.

Satsuki's confusion faded. Her expression flattened altogether, and as the queen passed her by, she wondered at how a dream could work in such a way as to render her unable to immediately recognize her own younger self.

The young princess managed to speak, if nervously, lifting determined eyes to those of the woman who strode toward her. "I… I don't like it, when you do this. It feels too strange…"

The monarch bent down to her level. "Oh?" she said, all smiles and innocent surprise. "You never said so, silly thing. But as you'll learn, my dear, *actions* speak more clearly than words."

Bewilderment was overtaking the princess's bright blue eyes as the woman reached forward, hand snaking to the back of her dainty dress.

"If you don't like what I'm doing, then by all means - *stop* me."

Stop her? But the young Satsuki did not have time to mull her confusion. When a snap was undone in the back of the dress, she screeched suddenly, slapping Her Majesty's arm away.

The older Satsuki knew the face the girl then looked up at was amused. Amused, at what a child's clumsy resistance had amounted to. But the girl knew not what the make of the expression; the small princess was wondering if she'd passed some manner of test, before the smiling queen reached out to grasp and shortly break two fingers of the hand that had slapped her.

The girl screamed, and the queen hit her with an open hand, knocking her to the floor. Satsuki couldn't look away, couldn't intervene, as she watched the scene unfold.

"Our world is ruled by strength, Satsuki. If what *you* want and what *I* want are opposing things… one of us simply will not have things go as she would like, you see? That's why I hurt you; that's why you're bawling like a wounded cub, right now." Her voice was sharpening, but forever calm and matter-of-fact, as she ripped the pastel dress. "I'll say it again. If you don't like what I'm doing, stop me."

Such was the law of a tyrant. It was not one's place, Her Majesty would purport, to protest something one could not with their own strength prevent.

The young princess, too shocked and hurt to sob any longer, sealed her eyes in bitter humiliation. In a way no one should have ever been taught to, she learned to endure.

The present Satsuki shut her eyes with her. She didn't intervene, for she wouldn't change the past.

The precious control she had was over their future.

"Stop me."

"Just you wait," said the Pure White Tiger, opening her eyes on an immense dragon of light that loomed menacingly above.

Her adversary was blue and white, amorphous and burning, yet somehow retaining the shape of a winged beast that shook with rage

where it stood. Eyes of crimson ringed by orange and black, narrowed in a predatory glower, were its most defined feature.

Satsuki spoke evenly over its steady growl, a sinister smirk on her lips. “You dare to tread here, Junketsu?”

A castle wall stood at her back, towering and fortified. This domain was Satsuki’s, resting on the boundary of dreams and reality.

“Proudest Junketsu, ancient and strong - a petty servant of Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou?”

“Hush, child. Shouldst thou resist, mine options wilt prove not to thy liking…”

Satsuki reached to her back, finding her sword there and slowly drawing it. “Vulgar miscreant. To whom do you suppose you speak?”

Ryuu and Senketsu overlooked a section of Lower City from a hill leading into it. The woman held a jacket over her shoulder, sloughed earlier in their walk so she could better feel the breeze that periodically tousled her hair and the dog's fur.

The area at the capital's outskirts known as Lower City could hardly be called so much as a village. Yet the Darkstriders' shantytown, the configuration of its piles of scrap and chipped brick hovels clustered against and sprawling from a decreasing number of older structures, had grown familiar to Ryuu; years had passed since the last time the Crown's trebuchets and burning artillery had rained hell on the settlement nestled by the wall. A few precious fields even kept up a meager crop, dotting the vista with patches of dark soil and rows of green.

A bored-looking archer, his elbows propped on the wall of a rickety watchtower nearby, raised his arm to wave Ryuu on when she looked up at him. Nodding, the woman made down the hill and into the village at an easy pace, with Senketsu trotting behind.

Ryuu nodded at villagers in light-colored robes, identifying some she knew by the decorations on their porcelain masks; the Darkstriders typically reserved darker wear for jobs, and while they weren't required to hide their faces within their village, they were expected to make themselves faceless when out in public beyond it. It was a longstanding mandate of the Crown that those with their blood could not own property in the city, and should don the masks to clearly profess their station. But naturally, it was a rule some at times risked breaking, depending on the nature of their work.

The layout of the broken village really had changed, since long ago; Ryuu had wondered many a time on her approach when exactly she might have passed the spot where Mako had first stumbled upon a wounded young dragon, and gone running for help. The Mankanshoku place itself had changed locations a handful of times since then, as well. Where had their hovel been, that morning?

-"*We need to get the bolt out. She's too small to last long with that in her lung…"*-

-"*Can you understand me, small ryuu? We're going to pull it out. It'll hurt, it's wedged between these two ribs-,"*

Thrashing anxiously, mindlessly, against the people holding her down. Her snout is tied shut, after she nearly snapped at someone's reaching hands before. A stifled whine, jaws straining fruitlessly at the rope. Someone is holding her by the horns, a neat fit in their hands. Masked people have her pinned down, legs, wings, tail, head - they had called in more humans, she was surrounded, the wound still hurt-

-A countdown, a pull - a screaming screech, lips peeling from her teeth, wings thrashing out to shove people to the walls of the cramped space. A voice - "Hold her still!" - the smell of blood, her blood, the feel of her blood dripping heavy again-

-And she settles down, eyes fierce with pain, body weakening, steam rising from her scales - and she pops into the shape of a small girl,

clutching her side, eyes darting in a panic about the bewildered faces above her that aren't hidden by masks.

Then the rotund fellow the masked child had called 'Papa' shushes softly, a sad look in his eyes, and shrugs off his confusion in order to tend the bleeding wound in her ribs.-

"Is that Ryuu I see?"

Ryuu turned her head at the pleasant voice, spotting a brown-haired woman in a dull peach-colored robe balancing a wash basket against her hip. She'd been approaching the same hovel as Ryuu, and sported a cheerful smile, a mask hanging on her shoulder. Ryuu brightened at the sight of her.

"Hey, Mrs. Mankanshoku! Could I help you hang the laundry-?"

"Ryuu-chan!"

"Boss!"

Ryuu could barely turn her head toward the roof of the building the hovel leaned against before Mako crashed down against her front; the shorter woman's legs caught around Ryuu's waist, her arms around her neck, and Ryuu caught herself before overbalancing as she clung. When the shorter Matarou promptly landed on Mako's back, however, only a well-timed push of Senketsu's front paws on Ryuu's upper back kept the halfling from toppling.

"Must you two *ambush* poor Ryuu-chan every time she visits?" the mother chided, continuing toward the clothesline that stretched from a hook on the wall to a nearby post.

"It's cool, Mom!" Matarou chuckled, flipping to the ground. "Boss here has the strength of twenty men! Uh… It is okay, right, Boss Ryuu?"

"Next time, I dodge you both," Ryuu deadpanned with a smile, eyebrow twitching.

The Mankanshoku siblings shared in an exaggerated groan of complaint.

The sun was low by the time laundry was out to dry, the field was watered, the roof the siblings had been working on was patched up, and a stew was prepared and simmering in a cookpot in the Mankanshoku home. Ryuu had grown far more somber as she and Mako skipped stones on the lower Hakuryou, a short trek from the Darkstriders' village. Senketsu sniffed and dug about the muddy riverbank nearby.

"That's about the size of it," Ryuu finished, flicking her wrist to let fly. Try as she might, she rarely got a stone to skip as many times as Mako's, despite years under the shorter woman's tutelage.

Mako crossed her arms and made a long 'hmm' sound, considering what Ryuu had told her. They were beyond the hamlet's ill-defined boundary; the mask that now hid her face was ornamental, not the sort of functional cloth mask she'd wear on covert work. It would alert any to her caste if she ventured beyond Lower City, so that otherwise unsuspecting citizens would know immediately her unscrupulous and dishonorable station.

Ryuu's jaw clenched at the thought. Mako and her folks were the most trustworthy people she knew. Still, for obvious reasons, Ryuu hadn't gone into detail out in the open on the secrets she now knew about the guild. More or less, the Darkstrider had learned that the Sensei had lied to Ryuu about some things, on top of sharing *Ryuu's* secrets with people who wanted to use her power.

"That's wrong," Mako concluded at last, nodding a few times to herself.

Ryuu smiled in spite of herself, head dipping. True, she had hardly been expecting any sage knowledge to be forthcoming from the young Darkstrider elite. It was comforting, all the same, to talk it out with her two closest friends.

Mako adjusted Ryuu's arm and grip as she was sizing up a new stone in her hand. Overthinking, Ryuu flicked it straight into the water, where it slipped under without a skip.

Senketsu stopped at Mako's side, wagging his tail; she accepted the slobbery stone he offered, scratching his ears appreciatively. The rock was round and flat, and skipped impressively on the water's surface when she tossed it, ultimately sailing onto the opposite bank.

Mako crouched and held up her hand, getting a high-five from the hound's paw. Ryuu stooped and dropped onto her rear by the river, admitting defeat. "It's just…" She thought for a moment. "It's like suddenly everything's changing, and everyone was in on this huge thing - and they just expect me to roll with it, because what I was doing until now was some kind of sham, anyways! My *secrets* wern't even mine to keep. My old man planned for things to go this way or that, and now that they're moving, I'm a key figure in some grand bloody scheme I didn't even know about."

"And you don't want to go along with it?" Mako asked, sitting at her side.

"I mean… it's not like I'm *against* what they're doing," Ryuu admitted. "But it's still not fair. I know, 'Nothing's fair in this city' - Sensei reminded me of that plenty of times growing up. But stuff like this…"

"You feel like you don't have any control," Mako ventured.

"I'll always have *some* control," Ryuu scoffed, bitter. She lay back in the grass, head on her hands, staring into the orange and purple hues of the clouds and the sunset. "No one can take that from me. With what I am, no one can *make* me do anything. Even if this whole life, the whole guild, the whole sarden *city* was fixing to crumble

apart, I could fly away in a heartbeat, and leave those bastards coughing in the dust."

"But you won't," Mako said astutely, "and that's the tough part."

Ryuu grumbled, turning her head away, but didn't overtly disagree.

The Darkstrider tipped her head back, considering the patches of clouds in the sky above, while Senketsu followed her gaze. "Lots of times it looks easier to run, but it's still not something we do, right?"

Ryuuko opened her eyes, but didn't face them. "… Why *do* the Darkstriders stay hunkered down here? When the Crown keeps trying to beat you down, and the city looks at you like a gang of cutthroats and crooks?"

It may have been a question she'd asked before, but she never seemed to pin down a definitive answer.

"The Crown won't let you live anywhere else in the city," she continued, "but they can't watch you outside it - and you lot have the skills to survive anywhere. Pox - you could make a killing wiping out fiends in the borderlands, if you wanted! Why *not* just pack up and go, after they tried to raze the village again those years ago?"

"If we left, I wouldn't get to see Ryuu-chan and Senketsu anymore!"

"Mako…"

"My people have a reason to stay here, so we stay," she said simply. "We have a responsibility. When the time comes, we need to be ready."

"A responsibility to whom, exactly?"

Mako was silent, as if considering how much she could say. Ryuu imagined her brow was wrinkling behind her mask. "… Our ancestors," Mako settled, when Ryuu scrutinized her with a look of

annoyance. Mako nodded twice, humming. "And more, but you can't leave out the ancestors!"

"And why do you have to do anything for them?"

"We don't *have* to, and they can't make us, but it's our way," Mako concluded cheerfully, eyes shut.

"… I don't get it," Ryuu said. But then, no one really understood the Darkstriders. Stories said their ancestors had come from afar with the ancient Kiryuuin clan, as their vassals. But at some point in the course of the crisis the Kiryuuin had averted, a rift had formed; the servants had done something that left them branded as traitors, their blood supposedly cursed.

Yet generations of Darkstriders, forever labeled dishonorable, demonized and feared by Middle and Upper City alike, had held onto their craft and continued to turn out elites of Mako's caliber. They scraped by with jobs mostly outside the City, anywhere out of the view and out of the way of the Crown - but could never send too many of their warriors away at once, as the most recent strike to nearly burn their settlement to the ground would remind them.

So despite their power, they rode out attack after attack, weathered every attempt to scatter them to the wind, and lived like refugees in their home. Still Ryuu had never heard of any of them leveling so much as a sour word toward the Crown.

"I don't get it," she repeated, groaning. "What reason do you have to be loyal to anyone but yourselves?"

"My reasons don't have to be your reasons, silly!" Mako pointed out. "And just because there aren't many people who could stand against powers like the Kiryuuin's - I mean, that doesn't mean anyone can force you to risk yourself to fight them. You choose what you fight for."

Senketsu gave a soft 'wuff,' as if to second the words. Ryuu looked up at them from where she lay. Water met her cheek; a smattering of rain was falling amid the broken clouds and sun.

"Ryuu-chan?" Mako asked. "How'd it feel, when you flew away from the castle that night?"

"What's this, suddenly?"

"I saw you - you looked amazing, and proud, and fierce. But you looked angry, and sad, and a whole lot of other things, too."

Senketsu watched Ryuuko closely, attentive for the answer. She scratched her head.

"It *felt* amazing. Yeah, I was pissed as hell at them that'd been attacking and chasing me. I didn't *have* to make a scene - I could have glided away from the rocks and tried to slip underwater, if I'd thought it through. But I didn't even think about hiding for a second… and I'd be lying if I said I regret it. I was free. When I spread my wings and showed 'em what I am, on my own terms, I felt the strongest I ever had. I felt *alive* . Like all the things I'd been taught to hold back for as long as I could remember came bursting out of me, burning, rising from my lungs - you should have seen them quake under the roar!" Ryuu laughed, turning to the other woman again. "Did you see it?"

Mako was studying her; Ryuu realized her voice had loudened as she spoke, and tried to straighten out the smile she discovered on her face. The Darkstrider tilted her head. "You love being what you are, but it hurts you to hide all the time. And you said it makes it harder to keep your cool when you do make the shift, right?"

"It's not like I'm a rampaging buffoon. It's just… nice to blow off some steam. No pun intended, mind you." *Though I shouldn't have set the forest on fire…*

"It wasn't right, but maybe Mr. Mikisugi thought you'd be open to using your power, just for that. To not have to hide anymore."

"It's not the same," Ryuu persisted. "Being 'me' isn't using my other self just to fight at someone's beck and call. Why the hell should I stick with people who see part of me as a weapon?" She ground her teeth. "And the Sensei had the nerve to tuck a Drakefell blossom in his pocket before he told me their plans for me." She scowled. "Some vote of confidence, yeah? To risk my hide for folks like that…"

"You choose what matters enough to you to fight for," Mako said. "The way my folks see it, you fight for what you believe in or you don't fight at all." Beads of the light rain had started trailing down her mask. "Like, in my case… Well, if *you* chose to fight for a world where you wouldn't be hunted for what you are - then *I'd* probably fight for Ryuuko-chan and Senketsu, too."

"Senketsu too, huh?" Ryuu chortled, while the mutt beamed lovingly at the Mankanshoku, a wagging tail making evident his appreciation.

Ryuu couldn't see Mako's face, of course, as the Darkstrider squealed and ruffled Senketsu's fur. Ryuu frowned in thought.

"Do you feel better, Ryuu-chan?" Mako asked eventually, still petting Senketsu. "I think the best thing for you is to fight for you."

"Oh, I'll fight for 'me,'" Ryuu said, sitting up. She reached out, pausing briefly, and ran a thumb over Mako's mask at her cheek as the other woman turned toward her. Amber eyes just briefly caught the fading sunlight through the eyeholes of the mask. "We'll also fight… for a world where you and your folks aren't treated like this, either."

"Ryuu-chan…?"

Ryuuko lowered her head. She would talk to the Sensei, and see what he had to say.

Satsuki’s eyes opened slowly, blinking.

She lay on top of the comforter of her luxurious bed; the ornately carved posts that rose from the corners of its wooden frame supported a canopy well above, curtains hanging from all but one side. Her gaze drifted that way, to the smiling owner of the hand that lazily traced the contours of her armor and sleeves.

“Who are you, now?” Ragyou asked simply.

The princess’s eyes shut. “Some of… both.”

The queen hummed to herself, fascinated. “Then I suppose I ought congratulate you both for your feats, and the perils you survived. Rebel activity was a distinct possibility… but even I couldn’t have imagined a *god* would have the temerity to seek you out!” Her slender fingers drifted from the dormant Junketsu’s surface at her breast, to Satsuki’s chin. “*Godslayer*… I am most impressed, my dear.”

The princess sat up, eyes finding a tall mirror standing near the wall behind Ragyou. Red-orange markings still underscored her eyes. She groaned, blinking in fatigue. She knew not how much time had passed, but she did not feel rested. “Kokutani…?” she asked with a wince, trying to recall.

“The troops and attendants reported in your absence,” Ragyou assured her, as her hand began to meander once more. “The settlement harbored those with the gall to try to assassinate my own prized *cub* . I sent an army to level the place, naturally. It will be rebuilt better than it was. Rest assured, their attack will not go unpunished. One settlement may be cleansed, but the rest of the heretics among us *will* be flushed out and exterminated soon enough.”

Satsuki’s eyes sealed themselves again. “I see. Good.”

A sigh. “It’s so wonderful you’re safe… To think, when the divines themselves sought to snatch you away from the proper destiny I so meticulously arranged for you, you rebuffed the brazen assault with a vengeance, to return to my side once more. You’ve done so well.”

Ragyou studied for her a long moment. Adoring, in her narcissistic way; gloating, like a beast upon prey.

“Satsuki… do you understand the position you’re in?”

The princess met her gaze, guarded. “I do believe so, Mother.”

The queen smirked. “Junketsu… She seems not as pliant as you promised. You disappoint me with your failure.”

Satsuki’s throat tightened. Suddenly she wanted to shake her head, to explain; trembling lips parted, and words struggled to rise, in no more than a whisper.

“The girl… hath erected walls that even… even *I* cannot s-surmount-,”

The beast’s hold snapped, and Satsuki dropped her head, panting for breath. This was bad. This was very bad.

“Speak, ancient Junketsu.”

Satsuki straightened unconsciously, fighting as it answered through her again. “Forgive me, fair Queen - Her heart’s intent - I cannot - *unveil* -!” Satsuki broke free with a growl, looking at the armor, and then Ragyou, in shock. “Please, Mother, stop this. It frightens me-,”

“Oh, yes - I’m sure you’re merely thwarting Junketsu’s advances so dexterously out of blind, thoughtless confusion and fear. You *poor* thing,” Ragyou crooned, wicked. “Surely you have nothing to hide, least of all from me.”

“Mother…”

“Let us try something, Satsuki. You should feel Junketsu’s spirit react to me, when I will it. I imagine it shall prove *quite* unpleasant. When that happens, instead of locking up, *let* Junketsu have a look into that mulish head of yours.”

Nothing could have prepared Satsuki for the strange power that rushed over them. The influence Ragyou freely exerted on the ancient dragon’s spirit was outrageous; Satsuki felt it through her and Junketsu’s bizarre bond. It was foul. She felt as the tamed Junketsu, so shrewd and verbose, was reduced almost effortlessly to a frenzied, mindless beast, a beast that had taken up habitation in her mind.

She yelled aloud, both hands grasping at her skull as the spirit of the armor raged against her fatigued defenses with impossible vigor, with desperation. She could not under any circumstances allow him to tear through. She would not be bested by a broken animal, a mess of a so-called legendary beast rendered so distraught by his inability to please his master. A creature that would bend before this repulsive sensation, and be so powerfully enthralled, was one Satsuki all the more staunchly refused to yield to.

“Mother,” Satsuki tried, a terse whisper. *Stop. Stop. Stop.*

“Satsuki… Is there anything you’re hiding from me? Anything at all?”

No. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t form the word. She was sabotaged.

“I’ve found it curious for some time… that you keep an Augment potion hidden on your person whenever you’re around me, as if to counter my affinity for the Detriment arts. For the longest time, you see… I’ve been getting the sense that you’re putting on an *act* .”

Satsuki sputtered, vocal cords drawn tight, lungs paralyzed between conflicting wills.

Junketsu could not seize the truth or force her to speak it, but he would not allow her to voice a falsehood.

He could tell when she was lying.

“I’m waiting, Satsuki,” Ragyou said. Her tone patient and soft as that of a parent with an obstinate child, as if she weren’t calmly driving Junketsu further into madness, like driving a stake through Satsuki and Junketsu both, and watching the princess sweat. “Answer me.”

Satsuki’s jaw set. Veins on her neck grew pronounced as she remained determinedly silent. But Junketsu was reaching his limit, agonized by the disobedience, shrilling in pain that afflicted them both.

“Nothing to say, then?” Ragyou crooned. “Poor, wretched girl… You need to relearn how to be a proper daughter. No - you need a stern hand to *reteach* you. So negligent I’ve been, and allowed you to stray…” She leaned over Satsuki, caressing her face and speaking in her ear, voice low. “Dishonesty brings such horrid suffering upon your heart. Until you are cleansed of your stubborn inclinations, I’ll keep you close, and give you all the love and *attention* you require…”

Satsuki shut her eyes as Ragyou slid her fingers down Junketsu's light plates over her stomach. Threats, nothing more. What Ragyou threatened was nothing she could not endure.

But Satsuki’s victory, her righteous destiny, slipping from grasp - this now very real possibility made her fear, more strongly than the course of her mother’s hand could. The things she feared, the secrets she held, were beyond the places her mother’s hands could reach.

“Yes… My poor daughter took ill after the trauma she suffered in Kokutani. She became unbalanced, and forgot how to speak…”

But if Satsuki slipped up for so much as a moment, Junketsu would reach those places. Junketsu would gore and gut her for the queen, and spill out her secrets for all to see.

“You don’t need the Circle; you don’t need to be chasing dragons or commanding armies, just now. You need to stay right here, under Mother’s watchful eye, and be a proper, obedient princess from now on…”

And Junketsu shrilled in her skull, and would not be silenced - trapped in a vessel who was disobedient to his master, and rattling Satsuki with his excruciating need to pry the truth out of her. Her hand sank into the bedsheets at her side, quivering as it grasped. So long as the queen held sway over Junketsu, he and Satsuki would suffer together for as long as Ragyou pleased.

Satsuki’s gritted teeth parted shakingly. She wouldn't weather a siege this way; the tension was too much, too quickly. “P-please…”

“Hmm?” Ragyou crooned, attentive.

Even if for only a minute…

“Please… take this armor off of me.”

There was something still darker, repugnantly sensuous, in the queen’s taunting amusement now. “Are you asking me to *strip* you, Satsuki?” Her hand grazed at Satsuki’s jawline and lips. “Is that what you want?”

The princess kept her eyes squeezed bitterly shut, and nodded.

Satsuki would face what she knew she could endure.

Surely enough Her Majesty's depravity, in combination with her confidence over her seemingly vulnerable daughter, wouldn't allow her to turn down the request.

When Junketsu came off, in a twisted reprieve, Satsuki's mind was her own.

Some time later, when the armor locked around her again, the struggle resumed with renewed ferocity, laying her will under siege. As Ragyou commanded it, the maddened armor held fast in the queen's absence, and didn't allow itself to even begin to be removed by Satsuki's hands.

Thus Ragyou ensured the only relative solace Satsuki would receive in the coming days came when Junketsu was removed from her, for the queen to have her way.

~ ~

City of Masks

[img: https://orig07.deviantart.net/9d6d/f/2017/225/5/4/ryuu_growing_up_50percent_by_hinata0321-dbjxdne.png]

End

She makes the shift at random, without thought or apparent reason, back and forth. Can she control it consciously yet, I wonder?

But gods, is she an energetic child! Wriggling in my arms, a newborn babe one moment, a… hatchling? Not as though she hatched from anything, but a 'hatchling' the next. Then a baby again, the nubs of her horns poking past her wisps of hair and brushing my hand that cradles her head. Earlier a passerby looked suspiciously as I tried to keep the blanket around her.

My mind fears that woman's eyes everywhere, but surely none tailed me to this inn. The child sleeps peacefully now, fed and satisfied, but I would spend the night awake even were I not still waiting for the

gods to settle on her name. What sort of destiny are the divines gathering upon your shoulders, my girl? Whatever the size of it, I will shoulder it with you, near or far. How I want your name to be the one spoken of in the prophecy, whatever fate that name will spell for you…

I'm jumping at shadows. The sooner she… the sooner young Ryuuko is away from other people, the better.

I highly recommend viewing the chapter illustration full size. For size comparison, I aimed to make all of them to scale to each other, but as a result, baby human and dragon Ryuuko (and all of the human Ryuukos, really) are pretty tiny in the scaled-down version above.

Alternatively, it's on tumblr **here**, broken up into several pictures cropped to the size of each pair (if the quality's screwy, be sure to click to pull up photoset viewing mode). That version might be easier if you're on mobile; additionally, it has a compilation picture with overlap to put all of them in the same frame, still to scale.

The Circle's Recruit

Chapter 12: The Circle's Recruit

Thanks as always to everyone commenting! Feedback is always welcome.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Twelve \ The Circle's Recruit

When Yoriyoshi let Ryuu into the shop, and Senketsu at her heels, the halfling glanced around - toward the kitchen, then down the hall toward the printing press the boy was already returning to. She opted to try for the garden.

Mikisugi, seated on a stone bench overlooking the pond, didn't take long to notice when she and the hound stepped through the sliding doors. "You came," he said, smiling hesitantly. "I'd begun to worry."

She shook her head when he patted the spot beside him on the bench. "You still don't trust me, old man."

He followed her gaze to his breast pocket, and frowned. "Forgive me, Ryuu. I can't stress how important this operation is."

"And you don't know how I'll react, with my temper and all. As if I'd hurt the bloke who took me in…"

"Ryuu…"

"Why don't you just use my true name, anyway? You were awful free with it with the council the other day. Among other things."

"I'm sorry. I… I shouldn't have told them anything without your permission, and I'm sorry. But I *do* trust you."

"That's what you say, with a pouch of Drakefell blossoms sitting in your pocket? How would you feel if I didn't normally carry a knife, but I kept one handy whenever I came near you - just to be on the safe side?"

After a long moment, he broke eye contact with her. He plucked the pouch from the swollen pocket, opening it to shake the pale petals in the lake. "There," he said, tossing the pouch aside, and kicked at the water's surface to scatter the petals away.

She studied him. She and the hound hung back a bit longer, and then approached. Ryuu sat a few feet from the man's side. "The bushes of them - you wanna rip those up, too? Or are they too nice a decoration?"

He looked across the garden, to where white Drakefell flowers dotted a messy row of green bushes. "There are reasons to keep a supply of it handy. Reasons not concerned with you. Can you trust me on that much?"

Slowly, she nodded. "But reasons *I'm* not privy to, yeah?"

He winced. She only looked up, at a crow that perched on a stone near the wall, and lowered her voice.

"When we were catching up, after I escaped the castle… you asked how big the other form is, now." A bitter smirk. "I figured you were curious as a… in a father figure sorta' way," she got out quickly, "because I hadn't made the shift in so long. But it wasn't that, was it? Were you just filing away information on how nice a weapon I'm developing into?"

She patted Senketsu on the head. He stood with a yawn, and wandered elsewhere in the garden, sniffing around as if for a good spot to relieve himself.

The Sensei shook his head. "Of course it was more than that, Ryuu. It… might have been a bit of both. But I could never just see you as a weapon. You have to hear me out-,"

"No - I don't. Not until you're ready to tell me everything about this battle you expect me to fight," she said, eyes resting on the crow as it fluttered its feathers briefly. She looked up to the new Boss of the guild at her side. "If Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime comes after me, I'll do my damnedest to drive her into the dirt. A monster who could wipe out battalions of grunts if she was left to them… You can count on me fighting her, but when it comes down to it, it won't be for anyone but *me* . Fair enough?"

He nodded.

She worked up a smile. "I'll believe you… I believe you see me as a person *and* a weapon, not just a weapon. I'll take it."

Mikisugi managed to smile in return.

Neither was looking at the crow perched on the rock when Ryuu whistled abruptly, and Senketsu lunged from behind it to snap the bird up in his fangs.

"It *was* following you, then?" Mikisugi asked seriously. The two were on their feet, watching the crow struggle as Senketsu thrashed the shrieking thing side to side, scattering some feathers. "I'd begun to wonder…"

The bird's cries died out, and its black plumage paled, fading to a ghostly turquoise blue before the creature went up in a puff of smoke. Senketsu blinked his eye, looking alertly about.

Another seemingly ordinary crow landed on a rock behind the hound. Then its beak parted, and a human voice was emitted. "Well… this is unfortunate. I planned to approach you soon, but the information to be got from your discussion was simply so tantalizing-,"

In a flash of speed, Senketsu snatched the new crow faster than it could raise its wings. This time, however, he didn't thrash or crush it in its jaws, but simply held it securely, its head sticking from one side of his mouth.

"This isn't necessary," the crow said in the same voice - a cool voice Ryuu had heard before. "I've a message for you. If we may move to someplace more private… What is this slobbering beast *doing* ?" he asked, sounding indignant as the dog sniffed sharply several times. Senketsu straightened and met Ryuu's eyes, his single, deep red iris glinting with confidence.

"Got the scent?" Ryuu asked.

"Ethereal summons don't *produce* scents," the bird pointed out, exasperated. "Even if they did, this one flew here-,"

The words cut out in an avian shriek as Senketsu crushed the crow, popping it into another burst of blue smoke.

"Of course a ball of Dark arcana doesn't produce a normal scent," Ryuu snarled, racing for the wall as the hound barked at it. "It's why a magic-sniffing mutt knew in no time flat what was up with you!"

"Ryuu!" Mikisugi called, but she was already holding out her arms for Senketsu to leap into them. Without a break in stride, she coiled her legs and leapt, springing with the large dog clear over the two-meter wall.

"I needed to blow off some steam, either way!" she called. Senketsu flowed from her arms as she dropped him, and they landed side by side, already sprinting, in the alley behind the garden. "A message,

my arse! If the princess's people are makin' their move now, I'll crush them before they get the drop on me!"

Mikisugi scrambled and vaulted the wall behind them, but Ryuu and Senketsu were well on their way by the time he landed. The Sensei drew and cocked his pistol, firing a magic bullet through an evaporating crow he sighted flying above the rooftops beside him.

Senketsu, running a bit ahead of Ryuuko, loosed an excited bark and kicked up the speed of his dash. He would trace the scent of the woven magic to the person who had cast it, as long as the finest strands of diverted arcana lingered out of place in the Worldflow around them; the summoner was hidden somewhere nearby, if the hound's already clear lock on him was any indication. The two emerged from the mouth of the alley, veering onto a busy street.

Thirty paces away, a hooded man, gawking back at them as he fled, turned and ran through the crowd.

"Oi!" Ryuu called. Marketgoers and hagglers saw the immense dog barreling through and hastily moved clear; ahead of them, their quarry shoved through anyone in his way, attracting many an angry yell. Ryuu felt an itch as the summoner wove something new - and a phantasmal bear arose from the cobblestones beside a vegetable cart, extant just long enough to send a screaming merchant staggering away from it, and hurl the cart into the street in front of Ryuu and the hound.

As it crashed down, Senketsu leapt - sailing high enough to clear the still-falling obstacle, and a wave of careening cabbages, by a comfortable margin. Ryuu leapt into an aerial flip, feet passing above her head as she cleared the cart as effortlessly herself.

The summoner had ducked into another alley ahead. Senketsu rushed into it, and Ryuu grabbed at a drain pipe to pivot around the corner without losing speed. The fleer pulled a pile of crates down as he passed them, spilling them into the narrow corridor, but Senketsu rammed through them, and Ryuu ran along the wall to dodge them.

If anything, the mage had only delayed himself in the effort to obstruct them, and by the looseness of his running form, he was already weary.

He slipped around another corner, only fifteen paces ahead. Ryuu, rather than descend from her wall-run, leapt to the opposite wall, continuing to climb, and sprang from it to the first wall again. Momentum carried her a short way along the surface before she reached the corner, and launched herself in a straight shot for the summoner below, crackling the bricks behind her and drawing her staff from her back.

Inumuta looked back at the hound behind him - and looked upward, grimacing, to see the thief a heartbeat from bowling him down.

But he'd just barely reached the position. From a door to the side burst the hulking, armored frame of Gamagoori, curled to intercept Ryuu with a roar just as Inumuta passed. The summoner's hair and cloak flapped to the side in a ferocious gale.

The Enforcer's steel shoulder plate struck Ryuu dead-on, throwing her through a window opposite them as Gamagoori was caught by its buckling frame. Crashing amid a shower of glass and tumbling onto the dusty floor of an abandoned shop, rolling to her feet and smacking against the wall, Ryuu shoved and bolted back the way she'd come, bursting from a back door a short way past Gamagoori in the alley.

"What the devil?!" he cried, watching her rush after Inumuta as he wrenched his armor free of the crumbling window frame and brick.

The mages would be the weakest targets at close range, and the peskiest from afar. She would take them out quickly. An ethereal wolf swirled to form at Inumuta's side, veering about to rush Senketsu as the summoner stopped and faced them. In a blur, the hound dodged a lunge of the summoned beast and sank heavy fangs into its throat. He tore to hurl the canid phantom into the wall beside them as an

evaporating mass of smoke, much to a panting Inumuta's bewildered dismay.

String music darted into the air - and as soon as Ryuu felt the first tranquilizing jab of Muddling at her mind, a magic bullet's shot rang out. On a balcony above, Jakuzure yelped as the bow of her violin shattered in a pulse of violet light. A slightly winded Mikisugi crouched on a rooftop across from her, having approached from a different route than Senketsu and Ryuu; now he leveled his weapon at the glowering Muddler, warning her against weaving any more magics.

Sanageyama came from the same doorway Gamagoori had, enhanced with a charge of Swift by the Enforcer's touch as he passed; Ryuu turned, swinging the Tenkantsuujou in time to deflect a blow of his sword, and he dashed past her and the hound, feet sliding to place him between them and Inumuta. He held his blade at the ready.

"The gang's all here!" Ryuu laughed, twirling and brandishing her staff in hand. "Where's that ruddy princess of yours? She didn't want to fight fair and square, I take it? Figures!"

"Mind your tongue, thief!" Gamagoori boomed, eyes wide and face lined with sudden outrage. "You know NOTHING of Satsuki-hime!!"

"Calm yourself!" Inumuta urged, straightening as he worked on catching his breath. "Thief- er, Miss Ryuu. We don't wish to fight. I said we wanted to speak to you, and I meant it!"

"Somehow, I'm not buyin' it," Ryuu said, eyes jumping between scattered adversaries. She was ready to move, ready to fight. If they were looking to whittle her down for the princess, the quicker she took them apart, the better.

"The princess isn't here," Sanageyama said, solemn. Anger sparked in his eyes, twisted his scowl. "So cool it already, would you?!"

"Testy, testy! Look who's talkin', Sir sharpshot javelin murderer himself-,"

"What was that, halfling wench?!"

Ryuu was deciding the knight would make a fine first target when a blanket of calm settled over her. When she understood, she shook it off, but realized the same effect had caused the green-haired man to hesitate as well, the furrows of his brow smoothing. He lowered his blade and looked away with an annoyed scoff, and Ryuu glared at the Muddler noblewoman above.

"If you dolts need a time-out so badly, I'll lull you all to sleep," she threatened. "Can you or can you not demonstrate better control over your emotions than children?"

"Miss noble-blood fancies herself in charge, huh?" the knight muttered.

"She has a point," Inumuta conceded sensibly. "We're all on edge, but if Satsuki-hime saw her own handpicked elites this way…" He frowned, thoughtful.

Gamagoori ran a hand through his hair, eyes shut. "Remember why we're here. Right now, the princess is our sole priority."

Ryuu shifted tensely as he approached her at a walk. But his hard face was now calm, and he held out a hand when he stood before her. She eyed it; he was an Augment and Chaos mage from what she knew, and a powerful one at that. He could mess her up in a hurry if he got hold of her.

"Thief Ryuu. You know who we are, and you're correct to assume we were sent by the princess, but it is not for the reasons you suspect. Hear us out. We need your help."

"You want my help?" She almost laughed. But to be honest, if this were a ploy for her capture, it seemed an elaborate and roundabout

approach for the high-and-mighty princess.

"We can't force you," the man said, "but we should appreciate if you would hear us out. I am Gamagoori Ira, Chief of Enforcers. That rank may mean less than nothing to you, but I swear on my shields that we four will honor a truce if you will."

Ryuu held his eyes. She didn't like it, but she couldn't deny that if they were being truthful, she was curious what the princess's goons were on about. And the Enforcer at least didn't give off the air of any double-crossing chuff, by her measure.

Grudgingly, she took his still-outstretched hand; it was so massive by comparison, her hand simply folded over the crook of his first finger and thumb, as they shook. "Alright, giant guy." She made a wry face. "Name's Ryuu. You wanna chat, I'm all ears."

The number - and variety - of individuals crammed into Mikisugi's safehouse was astounding. The giant sod, not keen on risking a chair that might not handle his weight (but too tall to stand straight) took up most of a sagging couch, with the petite Muddler fitting neatly in the space remaining at his side; along with the summoner, the knight Sanageyama had been relegated to the floor by the couch, with less grumbling than Ryuu would have expected.

Ryuu had to remind herself that the green-haired swordsman was one of the Crown's glorified butcherers, of the Queen's Own. Just now, however, he awkwardly scratched the ears of a hound that had wasted no time in winning him over. Senketsu had long since made use of their truce to happily give the newcomers a thorough sniffing-over, and if his wagging tail was any indicator, he'd shortly deemed them acceptable. In Ryuu's eyes, that amounted to something.

Ryuu and Mikisugi sat in chairs across from the Circle, along with a Darkstrider who hummed absentmindedly to herself where she sat on the floor beside the thieves. The half-dragon rolled her head

about on her neck, slouched with her arms propped on the back of her turned chair, and lifted a hand with a groan.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, *wait* . Let me make sure I got all of that."

"Of course," Gamagoori said, posture immaculate on the secondhand couch.

"You haven't seen the Kiryuuin princess since she came back from Kokutani."

"Correct."

"But from the room she's locked in, she signaled your summon bird outside the window by playing her flute."

"Yes," Inumuta answered.

"She can play a flute in code?"

"The princess trained us to coordinate with her in all manner of emergency scenarios," the summoner said, annoyed at her skepticism.

Ryuu scoffed. "O-kay, so she told you the queen's got her trapped in some mystical magical suit of armor that *controls her mind* ?"

"Infringes upon her will," Jakuzure corrected.

"What a bloody precise flute-code!" Ryuu remarked, feigning wonder.

"Bite me, thief," the musician spat.

"One bite and you'd be gone," Ryuu retorted, flashing her fangs.

"But," Mikisugi cut in, elbowing his disciple, "you lot have a plan for freeing Satsuki-hime. The princess conveyed to you that this armor influences her with a power rooted in Dark arcana, yes?"

"Yes," Jakuzure confirmed. "A dependable alchemist on our side thinks he can brew up a potent elixir infused with Holy arcana. If we can use it on Satsuki-hime, it should destabilize the Dark spell at least enough for the princess to use her own Holy affinity to break free."

Mako nodded a few times, attentive. "But the armor makes Satsuki-hime stronger than strong, huh? So if she and the magic armor are in cahoots, it'll be downright impossible to get close to her if it makes her protect it from something like what you've got planned!"

"Exactly," Gamagoori said, nodding approvingly. He studied the Darkstrider for a long few seconds, motionless. "Actually… When exactly did you get here?"

"I dropped in while you were sitting down! But I've been sticking close to you four since waaaay earlier. Of course I wanted to keep an eye on the people who were keeping an eye on Ryuu-chan!" she said, waving her hand in a downplaying gesture. "You look out for Satsuki-hime, I look out for Ryuu-chan!"

"I see," Gamagoori said, not seeming nearly as disconcerted as his paling companions. "What a dependable friend…"

Taking a breath, the giant lowered his gaze to the floor, serious. "You're right - the princess is incredibly powerful. If it came to a fight… As Satsuki-hime was before, the four of us together might have stood a reasonable chance against her. But after hearing of what became of the poor fools who ambushed her at Kokutani…" He grit his teeth.

"The four of us won't be enough to best her," Sanageyama said simply. His eyes settled on Ryuu. "But we now know someone who is."

"At least you, Ryuu, came close to matching Satsuki-hime singlehandedly before," Gamagoori picked up. "You alone probably wouldn't hold a candle to her now, either. But with the four of us

together, and you as backup, we have a prayer of success yet. To merely corner the princess long enough to hit her with the Holy water Iori is brewing up…"

"And you're conscripting Ryuu to help you free the princess?" Mikisugi asked, choosing his words carefully. "You say the queen has placed a cage about your Junpakko - the same murderous commander who has in the last several years proven Her Majesty's deadliest pawn. Something doesn't add up. What incentive does a Middle City thief have to oppose the queen's will, and risk her life, for some mad gambit of yours?"

"Incentive?" Sir Sanageyama looked up from scratching the hound's chin. "Suppose that, purely theoretically, a sack of a couple dozen pounds of gold and jewels from the royal treasury were to somehow find its way to your possession… pending the success of this plan, of course."

"You have my attention," Ryuu said. There was an undeniable glint in her eye as she wrestled down a giddy smile at the thought. She shook her head. "I mean - it won't be as simple as that, of course. Yeah. I have, er - standards, you know! I'm no mercenary."

Gamagoori held the thief's eyes squarely. "We're aware of the sorts of things you must have heard about the princess. But… as formidable as the princess seems, would you believe that the *queen* is more dangerous still?"

"Our queen, dangerous?" Mikisugi drawled. His practiced air of nonchalance did not take the steel from his eyes. "What a peculiar notion to come from the mouth of her own Chief of Enforcers…"

"Monarchs are oft prone to paranoia that their heirs will covet their power," the hulking man said dismissively, eyes shut. "For such a fear, the queen seeks to bind our lady's will. But Satsuki-hime would sooner die than allow herself to be reduced to some mindless weapon for the queen. She fights on as we speak, but if the

princess's will can be fully overtaken, I should fear at the calamity that will be its natural result."

Mikisugi considered this for several moments, while Ryuu tapped her foot distractedly on the floor. The Sensei scratched his head. "… If Her Highness disobeys a paranoid queen, and breaks from her hold… what does she plan to do next?"

"We're not at liberty to answer," Gamagoori said sternly, arms crossed. The expressions of the other three had come to mirror his in that moment, showing in solidarity that there would be no negotiation on this matter.

The Sensei made a sound, contemplative. "If I may confer *privately* with my darling disciple-,"

"I'll do it," Ryuu said. "If it means getting another crack at the Junpakko, count me in." She looked to her side. "That alright with you, Sensei?"

He sighed. "Fearsome as the princess is, I'm inclined to agree nothing good can come of her becoming a thrall to the queen. However, Ryuu… consider the worst case scenario, here. Do you want to drop yourself into the lap of the Crown that seeks to tame you?"

"With her lackeys on my side," she sneered, "magic armor or not, I shouldn't need to transform to win. From what I've seen, these four are tough enough. I don't show my true form, I don't need to worry about any Kiryuuin turning the tables on me, yeah?" She looked to the Circle. "What's the plan? As long as you don't expect me to bust open the tower she's cooped up in and snatch the princess away…"

"Heavens, no," Jakuzure groaned. "Have you ever heard the word 'subtlety,' thief? Our finest wager will be to fight as a *last* resort - to first attempt to free Satsuki-hime from the corruption without coming to blows."

"Alright," Ryuu said with a roll of the eyes. "She's been locked away by the queen. How do we plan to get close? If it's sneaking in, I should be able to manage it."

"Hardly," Sanageyama said bluntly.

"The tower is kept under constant watch," Gamagoori explained, "by guards who will move for nothing short of the direct orders of the queen. The room is under lock and key, and the window, which would demand from you quite the climb, is barred. You would never enter without alerting her, and we must assume she would be impelled on sight to eliminate an intruder."

"But there is one opportunity that may remain to us - a brief window of time in which we expect the princess's confinement will be lifted." Inumuta managed a nervous smile. "Most fortuitously, a certain Radiant Founding Day party is scheduled for the holiday evening - just under a week from today."

Ryuu blinked. "You mean…?"

"The queen is holding a gala, at which she plans to put the princess on display."

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The Circle's Recruit

[img: https://orig10.deviantart.net/9c0e/f/2017/243/e/9/ryuu_carrying_senketsu_crop_full_by_hinata0321-dblwg4u.png]

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A Primer on the Arcane Arts, Part IV:

Spells, once cast, are generally far simpler to dispel than they were to weave. Isolated arcana of the same domain but inverse in nature readily cancel each other, and even the most carefully crafted spells can often be dissolved in structure by raw application of the opposing Grand Arcanum, rather than requiring a precisely mirrored inverse spell. Woven spells behave as refined parcels, if you will, of the Worldflow's arcana, artificially and temporarily bound to a given shape by the mage's craft; the constituent magics will tend toward breaking down once more to their natural form, thus returning to the flow.

For this reason, Muddling illusions procured with the utmost finesse can often be countered even by non-mages equipped with powders or potions enchanted with Lucid; the skilled Detriment mage's hexes of Rigor or Enfeeble could be lifted by a burst of arcana from an Augment novice, and similarly, the Dark mage's ethereal conjurations are dissolved with relative ease on exposure to Holy. The contest of Nature mages of opposing branches pitting Rend against Order and Restore against Chaos is unsurprisingly unimpressive - while Order also negates spells that would distort gravity, and Chaos renders one incapable of effectively hastening or slowing time.

The Gentleman Thief

Chapter 13: The Gentleman Thief

Started a masterpost for the *Primer on the Arcane Arts* extras here! Just to have all the parts of the primer in one place, along with the Grand Arcana and Example Spells diagram. I'll update it as needed with more, and I'll probably start a similar post for the 'Isshin's Journal' extras once we've got a few more of them.

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Thirteen \ The Gentleman Thief

Satsuki measured her breaths in the aftermath. Her eyes were smoothly sealed, her head turned to the side, as she lay on the pool's steps.

"Piteous cub… won't you look at me?"

A hand cupped her face; she did not resist as Ragyou turned her head toward her again. Demurely, the princess cracked open her eyes in the dim, fluctuating yellow magelight of the bath.

The queen reveled in the sight of her, smiling as she involuntarily shook.

Such was the price of Satsuki's reprieve.

"I cleanse you, and cleanse you, and *cleanse* you. I have dear Junketsu soften you to reason. And still…"

Satsuki now sat mutely on a bench near the pool, knees together and head low, as her mother brushed a soft towel across her, touch lingering unapologetically in many a place.

"And still… have you no words to speak? You can even lie, right now. What's become of your lying tongue? Or has Junketsu deteriorated you so…? You haven't *actually* forgotten how to speak, when lying once came so simply to you?"

As Ragyou's hand drifted about her jawline and neck, Satsuki raised her head. Looked slowly at the queen, with dark-ringed, sleepless eyes, and spoke.

"I'll always love you, Mother."

The slap across her face snapped her head aside. Satsuki blinked, and lowered her head again.

When she was dressed in the dormant Junketsu, unusually, the dragon's spirit did not immediately go to war with her mind. If she were to describe the state of him, it was as if he sat back or crouched meekly, leaving Satsuki her distance.

Ragyou turned away, and snapped her fingers once.

Satsuki dropped to her knees when it hit her - Junketsu hurling himself against her defense like a beast unleashed on prey, tearing, beating, but not breaking through. Satsuki hardly registered Ragyou turning again before a kick struck her face, sending her sprawling onto her back.

"Say it again, Satsuki. Say it now, while you cannot lie."

Satsuki did not attempt to repeat her words. She only lay there, staring up at the queen with calm on her face.

Ragyou's scowl became level, disappointment in her eyes. "Hideous child… I'll remake you. You will no longer frustrate my advance. I'll

pick you apart and rebuild you anew, into the flawless, beautiful princess you were *always* meant to be…"

At the queen's smile, and laugh, Satsuki turned her head aside. Her voice was quiet, slow but deliberate. "Do you so want me by your side? To serve you… and Ancient Kouketsu?"

Ragyou's laughter had ceased, but after a moment of surprise, her smile grew wide. She didn't blink as she walked toward the prone Satsuki, digging a high heel painfully into her shoulder beneath Junketsu's epaulette. "So revoltingly clever. What reading have you done, cub?"

"The song of sealing… You have not played it?" Satsuki guessed, already confident of the answer. "You neglect the most sacred duty of our blood. It begins to show in the world around us. Wh-why…" She grunted as crimson began to darken Junketsu's cloth about her shoulder.

"We shall revel in a glorious renaissance… and you will fight for me, and bring it about, if only to shatter your willful heart. Your defiance proved amusing, but I bore of it, I'm afraid. Try as you might, Satsuki - lock yourself away, shun me with silence. You can't hurt me. But I *know* you can be hurt. Your heart is a warped, withered thing. I shall so enjoy it… snipping away all the excess, all the plague that drives you to oppose me, and making you into perfection… And when you are reborn as a doll that obeys my commands, the *ugly* side of you will know true misery, for as long as it refuses to fade."

Satsuki's gaze was severe. Ragyou ground her foot down, her leering eyes hungry for a reaction Satsuki would no longer humor her with. Soon she sighed and stepped away.

"You will not be killed, treacherous cub. If you are so enamored with wretched ideals, live with them gnawing at your heart. And in doing so invite them to slowly, so very slowly, crush all that you are beneath their weight."

Satisfied that her point had been made, the queen flaunted a ruthless smile, and walked away.

Ryuu raised and lowered her arms, twisted side to side. Satisfied with the binding about her chest, she set to wrapping her hands, wrists to knuckles.

"Say, Senketsu?" she said, pausing in her work. Sitting up on the cot behind her, the mutt was nearly at her eye level, and quirked his ears at his name.

She turned, meeting his eye for a long few seconds. "Is it… still not time?"

He lowered his head a bit, ears drooping.

"No, don't beat yourself up over it," she said, walking over to scratch his chin. He turned his head stubbornly to the side, eye shut, though his ears perked up at the attention.

"I'll be fine," she muttered with a gentle smile. Her hand brushed over the fang he wore like a pendant. "I have to be, so when it does come time…"

She trailed off as he butted his head softly into her chest, a grumble in his throat. He took the opportunity to get in some nuzzles, before she'd put on outer layers and have to avoid him for his fur. She hugged him close for a minute; then she stepped away. The hound stayed where he was, contemplative as she finished her hand wrap.

Light armor - a simple but tough vest, vambraces that wouldn't go past long sleeves, and greaves over wrapped shins, strapped neatly in place. She fastened a belt with similar leathery armor hanging down from the sides, which strapped around her legs below the crotch to guard outside her hips.

A dress shirt was followed by dark trousers, with the trousers secured by suspenders, snug over her shoulders and Y-shaped in the back. She checked her progress in the mirror, grabbing a crisp new cravat - and her balled pair of old socks on the table near it. She chucked the socks up at the basement door, hitting it squarely; a few moments after the thud (in which time Senketsu hopped down from the cot he knew he wasn't allowed on), Mikisugi opened the door and peered at Ryuu with halfhearted annoyance.

The Sensei was followed in a moment by a slim, elderly gentleman in a neat but nondescript coat; the manservant was quiet as he descended the basement stairs, dark eyes following the others as he hung back a polite distance. The calm old man was another of the few the Circle considered trustworthy, and was the one who'd gotten these clothes tailored for Ryuu. He seemed like a kind old fellow, but presently, as he had the few times she'd seen him, he had a slight furrow set into his brow, projecting a sense of restrained but perpetual unease.

The Sensei circled when he reached Ryuu, tapping his cane lightly at spots where he knew the armor to lie beneath the cloth. Satisfied it was hidden and secure, he started to nod - and bent to straighten her cravat at her neck, as he had many times before. Ryuu smirked wryly and let him help her into the waistcoat next.

"Gloves," the royal servant reminded them, and Mikisugi tossed them to Ryuu from the table. She caught them, slipping the quality gloves into place, up to her mid-forearms. She pulled on boots that held just the right amount of sheen, and was pleased with how comfortably the trouser legs blended into them below the knees.

Mikisugi retrieved the jacket from a wooden hanger as she tied a silky sash about the middle of the vest. The dark suit with long coattails was finely embroidered, sharp-shouldered, and had been tailored to measurements taken with her chest wrapped as it now was.

"You and the princess's goons pulled through, huh?" she snickered, threading her arms through the crisp garment's sleeves; the old man only dipped his head, evidently approving. Decorative cords and other small adornments, and a kerchief folded into the breast pocket, completed the formalwear of the governor's son she would be passing as.

"You'd be leagues safer going as a woman," the Sensei muttered, far from the first time.

"I'm a *wanted* woman," she rebutted, shrugging - though there was a glint in her eye. Certainly, she was nervous. Her blood was also simmering in anticipation, with some chaotic glee stowed carefully beneath her refined attire. She brushed a gloved hand over the cravat above her vest, and considered again the mirror and her slicked-back hair. "In the wrong frame, the wrong place, and the wrong clothes, even nobles who've seen my face shouldn't give a second glance."

Mikisugi studied her in profile, nodding to himself. A combination of binding, armor, and cleverly tailored layers left her figure thoroughly concealed. "You'll pass for a man. On the shorter side, but you'll pass." He may well have been more nervous than his student. He straightened from his scrutiny, a hand at his chin. "Voice," he demanded.

"There is hardly cause for concern, my good fellow," Ryuu answered. She did not force her voice to an extent that it would strike one unnatural, but adjusted her pitch and tone in such a way that her voice's timbre, her gentleman's mannerisms, and her confident Upper City accent melded comfortably into the persona. She pulled a watch from her pocket. "Heavens, look at the time! I'll be tardy for the biweekly Spiffy Chumps Conference!"

"Alright, you," Mikisugi chided, elbowing her gently.

"Do I pass?"

"You pass. I pray you'll think up a more realistic conference if you must."

As Ryuuko offered a crooked grin and sly wink, he shook his head.

"Ryuu… Please, don't die. And I suppose it goes without saying, but do *not* place yourself in a position where you could be tamed. Thanks to the Kokutani incident, the queen is preparing to go to outright war with the rebellion - to redouble the efforts of her armies and spies, in hope of flushing out and destroying those who oppose her wherever they can be found."

"I only have one Kiryuuin to watch out for right now, and I don't plan to lose to her." Ryuuko had slackened her formality, but continued to exercise her deeper voice as she spoke. "The queen's not scheduled to return to the capital, and arrive at the party, until late in the evening. That's the latest from our eyes on her, right?"

When she looked at him, the elderly servant nodded. One of Inumuta's summoned rodents, perched on the back of his hand before him, was doing the same.

The Circle's information and the thieves' own sources agreed that the queen's entourage had, in a several day tour, passed busily through a handful of major cities to parade battalions of marching and riding soldiers down their streets. The speeches the queen delivered to the citizens made the Crown's stance toward the 'inconsequential' rebellion clear enough. More importantly to Ryuu, they had hours to work with before the monarch's return.

"The number of troops outside the capital will work just fine for us. We crash the party early, we strike quick and clean, and there's that much we won't have to worry about."

"Quick and clean? Ryuu… You're up against someone who wiped out eight hundred soldiers singlehandedly, supposedly in *minutes* ."

Ryuu met his eyes, level. "I know," she said, cringing briefly. "I've thought about that. And I don't *like* thinkin' about it, but I reckon I could have done the same. I wouldn't, but I could."

"A difference of hearts…" Mikisugi remarked, his look softening.

"I figure… this'll be the best chance I have. Especially with the 'Circle' on my side. I can fight her," Ryuu asserted, "and I will. I won't let her run me out of my city, but I'm not waiting to be hunted down instead, either."

Senketsu whined, quirking his ears in an agitated look. Ryuu removed one glove and knelt, careful not to let the knee of the dress pants touch the floor, and beckoned him over to ruffle his ears. He didn't let the attention distract him this time, and kept his eye fixed on the woman as he placed a gentle lick on her hand.

"I'm sorry you can't come along," she told him. "But have a little faith in me, yeah? I'll be fine. Hold down the fort until I'm back."

He wrinkled his snout, but offered a curt bark of assent.

"That's a good fellow," she chuckled, standing again. "There you have it," she said to Mikisugi, "I can't die with such a cute guy waiting at home for me, now can I?"

At a soft sound, the trio looked to the old royal servant, who stepped nearer while clearing his throat. His hands were folded in front of him, and his worried face and empty eyes held something like hope as he considered the young thief.

"Miss Ryuu… Please, help Satsuki-hime." He bowed deeply at the waist. "She is like a daughter to me…"

Ryuu's lip twitched; his behavior had caught her off-balance. What was she to tell him?

Eventually she bowed her head. Whatever she thought of the princess, the old man's sincerity wasn't something she could easily ignore. *He's concerned for her. Worried sick, for the brutal Junpakko… and the Circle is the same. So even you have people like this around you, huh? Who'd have thunk…*

She took a deep breath and smiled before she straightened, showing a confident face that got the gloomy old fellow to brighten just a bit. "I'll do my best."

"A lord of the heavens descended to attempt to spare me a fate worse than death… and I slew him, righteous as he died."

'And look now at thyself. Fortunate art thou that Her Majesty remaineth to thee so attached; if she spared Your Highness for the royal blood's preservation alone, thou wouldst doubtless by now have been tied to a bed, made by some healthy suitor of Her Majesty's choosing to conceive an heir for her to sculpt anew…'

"So I should be grateful to her, you suggest? For her generous mercy, and her 'attachment' steeped in narcissism?" Satsuki cringed, at a pang in the headache that had become perpetual. Her nails scraped suddenly into the windowsill before her, and she narrowed her eyes. "Fool beast. Does it so ail you, to hear your master's character questioned?"

'How wouldst thou know it - of the strength with which a forceful taming compels?'

Satsuki continued to gaze from the window. Far below, a parade stretched colorfully down the capital's main street; confetti swirled in the air, and the playing of bands only faintly touched her ears. "It was forceful, then? Do you so fiercely obey her against your will?"

She'd felt the twinge, even as she said it. *'Hush, fool whelp. Her Majesty is a powerful ruler, and her goals suffereth before me no lack of appeal. She is proud, wealthy, ruthless, and strong, as any*

great monarch should be. Her cunning employment of force hardly equates to a detraction in character.'

"Unbelievable," Satsuki muttered.

Her hands clenched. *'Why continue to resist? Why subject thyself to this suffering? To serve obediently… Would that be so foul? Give in for just a moment, and free thyself of pain. Thou wilt understand then - it will be no great tragedy to serve as a blade of the queen, when thy soul remembers not why thou didst ever oppose her.'*

"If you think that way… if you suppose the Kiryuuin Satsuki of this moment could ever consent to such a thing, for my own comfort… we will never see eye to eye, after all."

'Flimsy ideals to espouse. Dost thou forget - that shortly after the gala's close, the insolent Kiryuuin Satsuki of this moment faceth her end? A short time from now, methinks we shall find ourselves to agree most famously. If thou couldst only admit defeat, and spare us the pain…'

Satsuki shook her head. She knew that Ragyou had been whittling her down in the hope of driving her to *choose* to submit, in favor of forcing her to. The queen delighted in the act of breaking others in spirit, and found a rare worthy opponent in the daughter who now strained to rebel despite her life of careful conditioning, straining from the queen's closing grasp. Kiryuuin Ragyou was a hunter who derived little from prey that required no cleverness or power to seize; to have Satsuki at least in some part willingly divulge the secrets she guarded, and fully bind herself to the tamed Junketsu and his spell of corruption, would have marked the queen's ideal victory.

Ragyou was susceptible to acting on emotion and desires, and so she was inefficient - and within the margins of this inefficiency, Satsuki had survived. If her foe was powerful enough to afford sacrificing a degree of effectiveness for amusement and games, the princess had no qualms with survival by virtue of being interesting

prey; she would fight a powerful opponent with anything she was given.

As opposed to the victory Ragyou sought, the queen would derive no such lofty power trip in using Junketsu to erase the princess's sense of self; there was no pleasure in being obeyed by a thrall that lacked a will with which to fancy thoughts of resistance. In such a case, Satsuki would fight for her and yield to her by no conscious choice of her own, and the troop locations and other precious information she withheld would be lost to the queen.

So Satsuki had bought time by stringing Ragyou along, dangling a promise of satisfaction before her captor's eyes by letting her think each day she might so soon break. Every stifled gasp, every vulnerable look, to goad the queen along with her charade. But Satsuki saw the twisted fear that arose at times in Ragyou's eyes, behind her gloating smiles - fear that Satsuki could not in fact be made to submit, her resolve would not bend, and if she would not break, only so many times remained for Ragyou to enjoy a Satsuki who still had enough of her self and pride intact to suffer humiliation at her hands. The queen desired not to lose her favorite plaything, and so she was easily convinced to hold onto hope that Satsuki would break.

If 'breaking' would be to voluntarily forsake all she had worked for, it was impossible for Satsuki to break.

The more evident this became to Ragyou, the less time Satsuki had. The queen had left Junketsu with the order to wear her down without cease while Ragyou was out touring neighboring settlements; if she found that Satsuki had so rapidly grown skilled with hiding her thoughts and keeping the armor's spirit at bay, that even after days without rest she remained steadfast in her resistance, the queen's patience would meet its end.

"Yes… I suppose that if all goes as she's planned… if nothing unusual were to happen before the queen's return, my endeavor effectively ends when next we see Her Majesty this evening."

'Unusual…?'

Satsuki tilted back her head, shutting her eyes a minute. "Well - what have I to lose?"

'Come again?'

"My mother, Queen Kiryuuin Ragyou, is a hideous pig. A revolting excuse for a human b-being, a pile of swiving, stinking filth, depraved, mad, and unfit to rule-,"

She collapsed as Junketsu's shock flashed quickly into pain, and he screeched in her skull. *'Stop! What - stop that!'*

"She deserves to perish - to be slain by these very hands… !" She grasped at her heart. A wave of nausea hit them, and Satsuki found she had broken out in a cold sweat. The physiological reactions were Junketsu's, at being bonded to someone who spoke such blasphemous words.

"If only we were to *kill* her, cut off her head, and spit on the corpse-!" Her throat tightened against the diatribe, her mouth falling mutely agape, as her heartbeat began to stagger. Boiling pain was surging into every fiber of their existence.

And her hands closed on Junketsu's collar and breastplate, fighting to tear him away.

So repulsed was he, at the sudden move he actually began to slip.

Then his artificial sense of duty won out, and the armor snapped almost too tightly back into place, locking around her - and Satsuki's hand snapped involuntarily over her mouth, stemming any further threats as a voice rang murderously in her skull.

'Thou wilt commit no such ATROCITY upon my QUEEN!'

They lay on the floor beneath the window until the heartbeat began to settle, and the lingering pain to subside. Only then could Satsuki

uncover her mouth, letting the arm thud down beside her.

"The strength of your taming… I think I can understand it, somewhat," she managed in a minute. Junketsu now said nothing, weary or cross; from what she sensed of him, he was like a sniveling creature, weeping as he feebly fought her. Fought for control, as he was bound by orders to, while Satsuki steadily countered him in what had become a reflex.

'I detest you. Mad girl, I hate you, I hate you…'

"I understand," Satsuki said. "You can't even choose your prison. I suppose I soon shan't any longer, myself. True helplessness, is it? The unfailing breaker of souls. I made myself strong, and supposed I would never experience such a thing."

When guards unlocked the door, and a gaggle of attendants discovered the princess staring at her ceiling, they flocked toward her prone form with cries for a medic and cries over her disheveled appearance. She needed to be presentable at the holiday gala, per the queen's wish.

She didn't resist when Junketsu, balking at the possibility of the queen's displeasure, urged her to cooperation with the sets of hands that helped her rise, that drew kerchiefs and dabbed sweat from her brow. His ancient, rumbling voice was frantic and preoccupied, even as he tried, weakly, to be coercive in her thoughts. Get ready for the party, the queen wants the princess to look nice at the party…

Satsuki chuckled, almost soundless. However passionately ancient Junketsu may or may not have freely supported the queen's goals, something here lay undeniably, fundamentally awry. Broken in a way that was at once nauseating, and mesmerizing, to so intimately behold.

A dragon tamed… was a miserable thing, indeed.

Jakuzure Nonon looked up when their horse-drawn carriage gave a soft bump.

"What was that?" Her date, a young Upper City mage and philosopher, swayed a bit as he stood up quickly. The gentleman tugged on his cravat, eyes casting around and chest puffed out as he postured with his cane. Here was a fellow on the path to the royal gala already mildly inebriated from partaking in a handful of smaller parties throughout the afternoon, and not so skilled at hiding it as he supposed.

"Calm down, will you?" Nonon sighed. She spied out the open window on her side a curious figure hidden among bushes just ahead on their path. She slyly Muddled the top hat-wearing thief out of the philosopher's perception, though it seemed a barely necessary precaution. "It was probably a bump in the road-,"

The carriage door rocked open, and a new gentleman swung down from its roof into the cabin, both glossy boots meeting the bewildered mook's chest before he could react. He sailed clear out the window on Nonon's side before he knew what hit him, and Mikisugi neatly pulled him into the bushes, rapped him with his cane, and towed his slackening body from view.

The newcomer had let go of the doorway to drop into the cabin, closing the door behind… him?

"You have got to be kidding me," Nonon said, grimacing as the disguised thief swept into a debonair bow.

Ryuu lifted her head with a wink, propping a gentleman's cane on the floor. "Lady Jakuzure, if you would pardon my late arrival! My poor cousin seems to have taken ill after the earlier festivities. He sends his apologies, but could not leave a fair lady in want of an escort. If a visiting governor's son who grew up fighting bandits and fiends in the outlands shan't prove too coarse a replacement in company, I, Ameno Shinzen, should like to accompany you in his stead."

The petite Muddler turned her head away, face warming. "I was already briefed on it, you backcountry dolt."

"M'lady's tongue wounds me!" Ryuu lamented, a hand at her breast. Her voice lowered. "Getting in character already, are we? I've high hopes for this endeavor of ours. Assuming you and the rest of the Circle Jerks come through."

"Call us that one more time, thief…"

Ryuu smiled, a bit apologetic as she sat back and threw one leg over the other; she handled her unease with teasing and jibes, but she understood to some extent why the Muddler was on edge. Her friend was in danger, and the disguised thief's jabs weren't something she was up for tolerating just now. "Okay, okay."

When Ryuu rested a hand on hers in her lap, Nonon looked up at her, bitter expression softening.

Ryuu gave a thumbs-up, and a crooked grin. "I *am* taking this seriously," she assured her. "We'll save your princess. What happens after, well - that'll fall to her to decide, once she's herself again."

Jakuzure's lip wrinkled before her look became stern, and she nodded.

Ryuu sat back. Providing reassurance, to someone who wanted only to protect the brutal princess who'd likely be after Ryuu's hide again when all this was over. Maybe she should skip town when this was done. She hoped at least that the Circle would deliver on their promise of gold, and the princess might just grant her a head start…

The gentleman thief shook her head. First thing's first, she told herself. Break the princess free of the queen's manipulation. Don't die. Piece of cake.

She smirked. And shouldn't that shake things up nicely?

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The 'Gentleman' Thief

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End

Ryuuko is teething. While she was distracted with a wooden ring made for such a purpose, I set about some business at my workbench, but may have ultimately dozed into her suppertime. Her 'other' side elected to reprimand my shortage of proper attention by chewing through the leg of the chair I'd fallen asleep in.

Gala Infiltration

Chapter 14: Gala Infiltration

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

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Fourteen \ Gala Infiltration

"My lady?"

The pink-haired mage rolled her eyes. She took Ryuu's offered hand to step from the carriage, rose red dress sweeping about her heels. Within the paved circle around them, several horse-drawn cars were dropping off noble guests.

Ryuu chortled as Jakuzure took her arm, and they began to walk; the thief spoke quietly to her date as she glanced back to give their driver, old Soroi, a wave. "If our roles were reversed, I know I would appreciate something to latch on to just to ensure I wouldn't go sprawling over my heels and gowns. However, I suppose if our roles were reversed, I might have more trouble than anything stooping to your level for support."

"You seemed graceful enough when you were running about the castle walls like a madwoman." Nonon turned up her nose, but stole another good look at the taller woman. "Your act is smoother than I expected; I daresay you'll actually pass for a nobleman free of suspicion," she admitted, "if a backcountry fellow, a bit stilted for his inexperience in the richer culture of the capital's noblesse."

'Ameno Shinzen' refrained, of course, from making a rude gesture representative of what he thought of the noblesse's culture. "Good to

know I pass inspection. But I make quite the handsome gentleman, do I not?"

Nonon looked away. "I-imbecile," she muttered. "Is that what you're concerned about right now?"

"If we die, at least we die looking sharp," Ryuu pointed out, but dipped her head as she caught sight of a cringe from her companion. She tried to shift the subject. "Forgive me - I ought to have said this first, but you look simply ravishing."

Nonon lifted her nose with a self-satisfied sound, and the two fell silent as they neared other couples on the path to the door.

The cul-de-sac circled an impressive fountain that dropped a sleek veil of water into its pool, and the courtyard stretching around them held a symmetrical array of gardens and manicured lawns to either side. The castle loomed in front of them at the head of a short path, grand doors open to admit the stream of guests in their dresses, robes, or suits. Ryuu looked up at the structure's spires and towers, its heavy stone walls. What a distinct manner she approached in for her second infiltration, strolling with a noblewoman to the front door while fireworks popped and cracked grandiosely in the twilit sky…

At the door, the hulking chief of Enforcers stood in an elegant formal coat and trousers, checking guests off a list he held. The pen and curling parchment roll looked tiny in his hands.

"Evening, my good fellow," Ryuu said, when she and Nonon reached him.

"Good evening, sir and madam," Gamagoori said, professional. "Names?"

"My lady Jakuzure Nonon - and I, Ameno Shinzen, filling the place of my cousin Ameno Takumi. Did you receive word from my uncle? I apologize for the change on such short notice, but my cousin is under the weather."

"But of course, Shinzen-san," the Enforcer said, checking the pair from his list. "It is no trouble at all. I wish Lord Takumi the swiftest recovery." He bowed at the waist, as he had to all the guests - a perhaps habitual, but curious mannerism. Ryuu had learned that upon his promotion to Chief of Enforcers he had been ennobled, and was required to lower his head only to the royal family. "Welcome, and enjoy the party."

After a curtsy and bow the pair progressed, and the arched entryway soon opened into an expansive ballroom.

Ryuu blinked in the crisp light, but shifted quickly from gawking to scouting the place's layout. It had to have been the largest room she'd ever seen. A luxurious quantity of magelights patterned the walls, and an array of four chandeliers hung from the ceiling; the largest overlooked the center of a higher balcony area in the far end of the room, led to by a sweeping staircase at either side wall. Rows of soft stained-glass windows stretched from high on the front and back walls to near the ceiling, which arched upward over the main area of the room with the support of towering pillars close to the edges. A thick glass skylight protruded down from the center of the ceiling in an octagonal dome, polished to a shine and occasionally glinting like a gem with the colors of fireworks outside.

The floor was a smooth, flawless sweep of glossy marble, swirled with speckled gray, black, and white designs. Presently rows of long tables were arranged neatly upon it, each offering a plethora of food and drink - steaming glazed meats, fish, a diverse selection of cheese, wine, fruit, soups, loaves of bread, greens and rice and potatoes in countless valuable-looking dishes. The entire scene could have been a painting of opulence and excess - a gala that could only be put on by someone who relished in flaunting her power and wealth as unquestionably supreme, far superior even to that of her most privileged and accomplished of subjects.

"You're overdoing the 'backcountry bumpkin' charade," Nonon muttered sarcastically under her breath, lips hardly moving with the words.

"The *food*," Ryuu insisted quietly. She struggled not to look scandalized as she watched a servant switch out a plate of sliced ham, it contents at most one-fourth depleted, to replace it with a full plate of the same selection. The difference, she realized, was that the new plate still steamed. "This would feed… people where I'm from… for weeks. No, months. How much will they waste?"

"It's the Radiant Founding Day banquet," Nonon said, no longer with snark. She looked away. "No expense is spared, by Her Majesty's planners. Pull your head out of the clouds, Shinzen-san."

They had come a way into the grand hall, and now ambled among circles of conversation. Nonon courteously greeted acquaintances she passed, while Ryuu even recognized with quiet satisfaction the faces of plenty of mooks whose estates she'd robbed in the past. Many guests stood and socialized, while some had begun to make plates and seat themselves at round dining tables. Servants milled about, restocking the platters or offering tea. Court musicians spun calm melodies from a location set up for them at a side of the room.

Ryuu now saw clearly the dais between the staircases to the far balcony, elevating just above ground level an ornate, central throne. From all surfaces that would not interfere with a seated occupant, it sported a host of carvings and emerging sculptures, telling a tale of minuscule warriors, flames, stars, and winged beasts; Ryuu was certain that if she approached, she would continue to uncover new details the closer she stood. This throne was unoccupied, awaiting the queen's later arrival.

A bit to the side of it a smaller, less extravagant throne of sorts held an expressionless, straight-backed Kiryuuin Satsuki.

The princess could have been a mannequin for the display of the light armor she wore, pale, motionless, and hardly seeming to absorb the sights of the lively room she overlooked.

Then her head turned slowly - a startling motion, in that her chilled gaze came to a halt upon intersecting with Ryuu.

The air seemed to rush out of the thief's lungs as mechanical idleness vanished for one moment from the princess's frame. Something wild and ancient in her eyes fixed upon Ryuu in her gentleman's garb, and saw straight through her.

That's not the princess, Ryuu realized. It was, but wasn't. Something else was peering through the princess's eyes.

Shortly that 'something' faded, and Ryuu flicked her gaze casually elsewhere, finding something to pretend to be distracted by. "Would you fancy a drink, Miss Nonon?" She steered her date toward the nearest table before she could answer.

"She's onto me," Ryuu whispered when they were far enough from any other partygoers. "Or whatever possesses her armor is onto me."

"From sixty paces away?" Nonon murmured back, batting her eyelashes and accepting the offered glass goblet of punch with an immaculately staged smile as Ryuu ladled another for herself.

"It smells my blood. It knows."

"Creepy…" Nonon remarked, and sipped her punch. "The pieces are almost in place." She met eyes with a green-haired gentleman; the knight in his formalwear nodded and raised a hand in greeting from some distance away, and the noblewoman on his arm seemed to berate him for being so distracted from the group they were mingling with. Like other members of the Queen's Own, Sanageyama wore his sword sheathed at his hip, a privilege flaunting the status of the kingdom's class of warrior elites. But at a party such as this, the knights wore their finest clothes in favor of their uniform armor, their weapons' sheathes secured only with decorative bands of cloth.

In a nearer part of the room, a Dark mage in suitably dark silken robes, his blue hair slicked with gel, engaged in some esoteric debate that Ryuu gathered was related to Worldflow theory. His discussion partners included the fair-haired alchemist beside him

and another few young mages, to the interest of numerous onlookers. But his eyes flickered subtly behind glinting glasses lenses toward the two, acknowledging the arrival of Nonon and Ryuu.

How well this handful of people works together… determines whether we live or die. With that somber thought, Ryuu swiped a dainty kebab from a table she and Nonon passed, and took a bite of honey-glazed roasted meat.

"Are you serious?" Nonon mouthed at her.

"Seriously about to risk my life," Ryuu whispered back. "The flavoring of this is sublime; you should've grabbed one."

"Then share yours."

"… You should've grabbed one," Ryuu repeated, blinking innocently as she took another bite.

Iori Shirou had retreated a bit from the mages' discussion; when Ryuu passed, moving between him and a pillar, a small flask slipped from his hand behind his back, and into her palm. She pocketed it. The elixir that was finally ready; no doubt Sanageyama already had his. The alchemist had been able to split the Holy concoction into two doses for each to retain adequate potency. The group had chosen the knight and (with some reluctance) the thief as the two most likely to be able to get close enough to the corrupted princess to make use of them.

"Ah, Lady Jakuzure! How goeth your evening?" Inumuta asked pleasantly, welcoming the pair.

"Well; thank you," she said, raising a brow. "Though I couldn't help but overhear, and I do believe Kengaku-san is misattributing Kotonomori's theory." She flashed a smile for the group. Several young men seemed to appreciate the look - and shortly switched to studying her date, who was polishing off an hors d'oeuvre. The slight

fellow fidgeted meekly while the lady dived into the intricacies of the respected theory and historical disagreements between its proponents, along with contemporary scholars' takes on the linguistic nuance of historical writing styles and figures of speech that dragged pieces of the canon into obscurity.

Evidently the mages were enraptured by controversy, as they mercifully overlooked Ryuu's silence for another several minutes as their scholarly debate reignited. When the conversation lulled, however, one scowled and shook his head. "Where is Takumi, anyway? He knows more about Divine Perturbation and Counterflow Annihilation Dynamics - *he'd* agree with me. Was he not to arrive with you, Miss Jakuzure?"

"Yes - and who might this scrawny chap be, anyhow?" another took the opportunity to ask, smiling down at Ryuu. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure of his introduction."

"I was merely so fascinated by the discussion," Ryuu said in her young man's voice, confident and suave, "I had no wish to interrupt. I am Ameno Shinzen, second son of the lord Ameno Zen'ei of the Takiyama Province. Dear Takumi was feeling unwell, so Uncle asked me to accompany the good Miss Jakuzure in his stead."

"A *borderland* province!" one exclaimed, before reigning in his distaste behind a smirk. "Pardon me, Shinzen. I should not assume; what have *you* to say of Kotonomori's theory?"

Ryuu smiled affably. "I'm afraid the arcane arts escape me, my good man."

"A dud, then? What a shame. Doubtless a mage of Lady Jakuzure's renown would prefer the accompaniment of someone a mite more… learned."

"Now, look here," Ryuu said, raising her chin just enough to inject a pinch of haughtiness into her confident look. "I may be a non-mage in a mage bloodline, but how many of you have laid eyes on the

borderlands? The places overrun by fiends and strange beasts? A man needs to be sharp to survive out there."

"Do tell - what adventures had you, in the *fearsome* backcountry?" one of the mages chortled.

"Why, just last summer I led troops to hunt down scores of beasts that preyed on our livestock - only to seek shelter the very first evening of our expedition and find ourselves upon a den of feral Bloodthirsters! I lost many a good soldier, that night, but I came out a stronger commander for it."

"Bloodthirsters? What - what *are* they like, up close?"

"Good of you to ask!" the gentleman said. Internally, Ryuu scoffed with the knowledge that many of them had likely come face to face with Bloodthirsters who passed as humans; the presence of such fiends, with no way to distinguish them, was a prospect few wanted to contemplate. "Have you ever imagined what a feral one is like, closer to you than the length of your cane? Now imagine one swinging at you, with hands twisted into talons." She held a hand before her heart, twitching her fingers for emphasis. "Ghouls that feast upon the living, eyes *frenzied* yet soulless, their hunger insatiable…"

She didn't mind making them squirm, as she regaled them with freshly conjured tall tales of the young lord Ameno Shinzen. This disguise didn't need to endure beyond one evening, so hell if her stories would all the more swiftly discredit the persona with a bit of research.

And she could not turn her eyes from the awareness that these people, even if friends of Jakuzure and the others, were the same noblesse who would merrily cheer and bet on the gruesome Celebrations put on by the queen - fellows who could eat fine meats and drink their tea and debate philosophy, while not far at all the worse off in Middle City scraped to put bread on the table, and even nearer, prisoners not all guilty rotted in the castle's dungeons. She

couldn't laugh with them the way she laughed with the folks of the guild; the noblesse didn't know their pain, never paused to think of it.

She almost winced when it occurred to her. *Did* she so thoughtlessly trust the Circle? Only the Muddler and the alchemist had been born to nobility, but even for all Jakuzure's pomp, they seemed a step apart from the Upper City swine with which Ryuu had grown familiar as she robbed them blind. Perhaps the people the princess surrounded herself with were different.

Or perhaps they were not; perhaps their masks held little more authenticity than the throwaway identity of Ameno Shinzen, and perhaps under the air of sophistication the noblesse so favored, they were much the same. But if nothing else, Ryuu trusted the Circle's desire to protect their princess.

"Heavens - look at the time," Nonon said, studying an ornate, oversized clock high on the far wall. "Shinzen dear, I must go and take my place in the imperial orchestra; the show is to begin shortly, and I had best present with a good bit of time to spare."

Ryuu bowed, pressing her lips softly to the back of the Muddler's gloved hand, to the dismay of several young gentlemen around them. "It has been an honor, my lady. I hope you might join me for at least one song before the night is through."

Nonon gave a sleek smile, curtsied, and turned to make toward the orchestra of the high imperial court.

"Poor thing," one gangly young gentleman said, sipping a drink at Ryuu's side as he watched Nonon go. "Rather well-known it is, that she was the closest of childhood friends to Satsuki-hime."

"The princess…?" Ryuu began, wondering if he had any worthwhile information to fish out.

"Oh, but surely you've heard?" he said, voice low. He arched a thin, glossy brow. "The princess has simply not been the same since

returning from a confrontation with some common-blooded barbarians in the south."

"The scoundrels think to *organize* themselves," another sod began, nose wrinkling. "The *nerve*, to lash out at the order it is but the Crown's duty to maintain!"

The first one continued, "The Kiryuuin princess was even challenged by a mad god - and slew it! The royal blood is incredible." He looked away, perturbed, after a wary glance toward the statue-like princess on her throne. "But something *happened* to her. She cracked under the trauma of so many vile attempts on her life, forgot how to *speak*…"

"A shame it is," the other said, nodding.

Ryuu frowned. "I do hope it hasn't hit Miss Jakuzure too hard."

"I'll say," the tall one snorted. "A connection in the royal family is a precious thing! To think it so secure, and then to lose it - there one day, uncertain the next. A tragedy."

"A loss for her, and for whatever man shall ultimately win her hand," the stouter man added, winking at Ryuu. "But worry not too deeply for her, Ameno-san; she is far from unmarriageable. An in with the future queen would have been quite the bonus, but even if poor Satsuki-hime has been reduced to a fool who cannot succeed the throne, the young Jakuzure's value is hardly diminished. She's a genius in fine music, and her family remains robust as ever in its historical royal and courtly ties - and a bloodline that pops out mages of *her* caliber is a treasure in its own right."

"I quite prefer a human over a carefully-weighed value scrawled at the foot of a ledger," Ryuu muttered, "and my treasures, of the gold and jeweled variety…"

"What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing."

One of the fellows smirked, an oily look. "If I may be blunt, Shinzen-san. However well you may fare with the tools of a barbarian in the countryside, you have a soft look about you - the look of someone who wouldn't last in our world." He exchanged smug looks with the other young noblesse around them, who grinned as if they were in on some joke. "Poor sod - nary a step above commonblooded pigs, in his dull manners of thought."

Ryuu narrowed her eyes. "Look here, *good sir* -,"

She'd begun to move, to get in his face to tell him a thing or two in a witty rejoinder, when she saw several smirks in front of her go flat.

A firm hand on the shoulder of her suit, and she snapped her head around to come eye to eye with one cold-faced Kiryuuin Satsuki.

Ryuu felt an immediate chill. *I didn't detect her…?!*

Why was she up and about? She was supposed to stay seated on her throne, 'projecting power' or some such drivel. But the dark power in her eye was the same that had struck Ryuu before, now all the clearer up close.

Hairs stood on the back of Ryuu's neck as she glowered back at the challenge, lips starting to peel from her teeth.

The crisp song of a flute darted into the air - a long, smoothly fluctuating tone that swept into a skillful melody. Jakuzure, at the head of the orchestra.

The other musicians seemed to try to hide their surprise at the pinkette's sudden start - but trailing a long note of transition from her introductory solo, the slow sounds of the orchestra's many flutes, strings, chimes and drums unfurled in serene concert.

The predatory gleam departed from Satsuki's tired eyes; Ryuu's blood calmed, and she swiftly relaxed the snarl trying to rile her lips. They were left as two women, albeit one in her gentlemanly disguise, holding eyes from less than a stride apart. The nearby nobles had bowed deeply to the princess, some descending to their knees in pale-faced deference.

Ryuu shifted, easing her shoulder from the royal's slackening hand. It was too soon - the others weren't in position. Stall. Buy time. Buy time…

She slipped into a flawless bow, offering a hand in welcome. She raised her head only enough to meet eyes with the princess again, and gave her most charming hint of a smile.

"My lady princess. It would be my honor…"

Wordless, the princess melded her hand into Ryuu's. They came together in the appropriate dance.

Those nearby, stifling shock, shortly began to join their partners and follow suit. They controlled rather impressively their gawking, for the barely-noble borderlands man the royal had elected to join; none wished to be spotted a step out of place by their militaristic princess.

The dance was graceful and slow, each pair of long motions measured against the orchestra's languid notes, punctuated by a synchronized pause. Right hands together, a circling step, drawing away from each other, lowering in something of a bow. A pause, a chime, and they drifted into motion again.

"What are you up to?"

Ryuu quirked a brow at the light question, but a calm focus had settled over her as she moved to the ceremonial music in the air. "Whatever do you mean, my good princess?" she muttered in return, her low voice retaining the gentleman's façade.

Satsuki smiled distantly, giving a subtle shake of her head. "Such refreshing music…" she sighed. She seemed for the moment as any noble lady, her exterior scholarly and reflective. "Did you know - once, the classical music of the style we're presently enjoying was rarely danced to in this way. The high court's performers would play music and dance for entertainment or ceremony, but modern paired dances developed under the influence of the old kingdom's customs."

"I knew not of this, Lady Princess," Ryuu said, spreading her arms and raising them, a mirror to her partner. Fingertips of four hands brushed delicately together, as their arms lowered before them, so slowly, again. "A fascinating thing…"

When the fading notes heralding their pause picked up again, the song had shifted - a lilting, but somewhat faster style and composition. Ryuu stuttered in her motion, uncertain. This one wasn't another symmetrical dance, that much she knew. She was trying to choose the correct dance among several with which she admittedly had more practice as a *follow* - and the princess came forward, holding and guiding her smoothly into the song. They now moved as one, and Ryuu stood very close to her taller partner as she, the 'gentleman,' submitted to her lead.

Certainly, she had been trained by Mikisugi in court dances, but the steps came to her now with surprising ease. It was as if the two were being woven into the music, the way mages wove threads of the Worldflow. Ryuu felt solid yet insubstantial, a spiral in a swirling, lyrical tune, buoyed by the flutes and neatly plucked lyres.

"The orchestra of the imperial court - their music is divine," Ryuu praised quietly, for only her partner to hear. She felt light, supremely focused yet tranquil. "What skill in their craft…"

"The wind instruments at the heart work a precious balance… The pipes of the *shou* are said to breathe the sound of heavenly light, while the double-reed *hichiriki* conveys the voices of the people of

the earth. And the sound of the *ryuuteki*, of course… becomes the dragon that roams the skies between them. Yet, I do so wonder…"

Ryuu had grown incredibly conscious of the strong hand on her side, the other hand melded to her gloved fingers, and their bodies with only a narrow margin unbreached between them. These bodies that had come to blows, that had in one seemingly far-off encounter burned for each other's destruction, and were destined do so again.

"What becomes of a dragon that climbs too far beyond the clouds…"

Quite a different dance approached them, as the orchestra's present song no doubt drew to a close.

"… Or one that too long furls its wings, to walk meanly upon the earth?"

They came to halt with a pause in the music, an oppressive heartbeat of silence. Ryuu's eyes were wide.

A new number picked up - and while the resumption would be all but seamless to the majority of the partygoers, Ryuu felt immediately a slight itch nipping at her scalp, with the counteraction of the high-quality Lucid powder dusted about her ears earlier that evening.

Ryuu watched the princess stiffen briefly and relax again, settled suggestibly into Ryuu's hijacked lead and continuing their dance as a haze clouded her expression. The other pairs that filled the arena of dance began to sway and twirl just a bit more idly, with a bit less precision, carried along by the sound.

The artists in the orchestra itself continued the song in a daze, now puppets to the music they had practiced many a time. Only one among them remained alert - Jakuzure Nonon, with sharp concentration in her eyes as she wove Muddling arcana into each and every current of the coordinated slew of melodies spinning into the air.

One of Jakuzure's most formidable skills… the capacity to read and tie into any system of music playing around her, Ryuu recalled. *To parse pieces of spells intricately into waves of sound, and effect Muddling magics of unrivaled subtlety and efficacy.*

She played music to complement her knack for using sounds - and their effects on people's state of mind - to amplify her spells, but she was hardly limited to lacing arcana only into the music she herself produced. And with a sizeable orchestra now mindlessly following her, the spell she steadily crafted and unleashed was absolute in its grip on all those unprepared in the room - even the princess, who had trained long to resist most Muddling attacks.

Ryuu didn't stop holding her partner's gaze as her hand drifted to her inner coat pocket, where the flask of Holy water lay. The princess's reflexes would be dull. She may not even notice…

Satsuki didn't make the next step in the dance. Her head began to tip back, eyelids drooping shut.

Then she glowered intensely forward, dark magics burning in her eyes. Her hand snapped onto the wrist of Ryuu's hand that neared her, and a wicked grin curled her lips.

"Thou'rt a sly halfling," she sneered, her grip in the sleeve's cuff bruising on Ryuu's wrist. "Open thy hand. Let us see what ist hidden within…"

"You're sounding a bit odd, suddenly," Ryuu tried to jeer, cringing as she kept her palm determinedly shut.

The music's tempo grew quick and energetic, and its assault, more concerted. Discarding all subtlety, Jakuzure simultaneously led and drove the puppet orchestra to play its loudest and, with the resulting sound, launched and focused an intense Muddling upon the princess.

Satsuki was driven to one knee, shaken. Ryuu grabbed the other woman's wrist, twisted her own hand free, and drew back to throw the flask at the princess's armor.

Satsuki twisted to dodge - in doing so, dragging Ryuu off-balance with shocking effortlessness and slamming her to the ground. The flask bounced on the marble floor behind the princess and spun and skittered away, cracked.

With a scowl, Satsuki sent a spike of ice jolting up from the earth, intercepting it in a bounce. A glimmering mist burst into the space a small radius around the shattering flask, and dissipated.

Blast… ! Ryuu threw a kick from the floor as the princess started to rise; the Kiryuuin stepped back to dodge, but as Ryuu lunged forward, the remnants of the Muddling left her sluggish. Satsuki was reacting to a feint as Ryuu pivoted, twirled behind her, and leapt onto her back.

Ryuu was locking an arm across her throat, her legs around her waist, as Sir Sanageyama rushed toward them, a flash of green. Some thirty strides away, Gamagoori stood in his armor with surly intensity on his scowling face, the lingering sparks of a Swift spell flickering from his outstretched hand.

The princess's teeth ground, in conflict with some unseen force. The half-dragon's eyes could barely track the knight as he closed the distance in a heartbeat, wind lashing out in his wake, and thrust forward a hand with the Holy elixir in his palm. A snarl curled his lips.

"*Go-!* "

Darkness overtook Ryuu's field of vision before she felt the pain. She was in the air, sailing and being cuffed and tossed about like a leaf as a sea of foul energy crashed ferociously out in all directions. She briefly spotted the knight sailing the other way - and a tiny flask, knocked from his hand, shattering uselessly outward at the pressure of Dark arcana engulfing it. Amid the currents of oily black light, the

space around the expanding cloud of Holy was one moment clear, and then blackened again.

Hot - it's hot! Ryuu grunted, shielding her face as she tumbled uncontrolled through the air. The darkness felt like fire - so maddening, she could have transformed with ease. But she wrestled the instinct back, and in a moment the air cleared. She spun, landing shakily on her feet. Her teeth clenched.

She blinked, and registered an armor boot approaching her face with alarming speed.

She was displaced some twenty more meters, back smashing into one of the grand pillars of the room. As she dropped onto her feet amid falling debris, staggering forward, coughing around blood clogging her nose and throat, she shook her head and arched her back. She grasped at her suit jacket and ripped it away, a growl bursting into a murderous cry as energy blazed up around her.

"***GEKIRIN!!*** "

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/7bb2/f/2017/328/5/8/outrage___project_ryuu_ch14__by_hinata0321-dbus9xf.png]

[OUTRAGE]

Steam curled from her lips, and dancing flames spiraled up from about her feet before settling against her.

Across from her, Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime stood in a grand suit of white armor; the stern glower from under her helmet's visor contrasted the wild intensity in the ghoulish, almost organic red eyes set in the tall spikes upon her shoulders.

"*Kamui Junketsu.* "

[GODPLATE JUNKETSU]

The nearby partygoers, fortunately, had been bowled back by the force of the princess's transformation; as the music had ceased, they only now began to confusedly register the scene unfolding at the heart of the ballroom.

"It's an emergency!" Gamagoori roared, at the other Enforcers lining the room. "Evacuate all guests beyond the castle's perimeter!! Get out, NOW!"

Frightened nobles began to rise, flocking for the doorway to the courtyard as similarly bewildered Enforcers ushered them along. The orchestra cleared but for one player. The knight held his blade at the ready. Across the room, a summoner remained similarly still, standing before an alchemist. They, like the Muddler, the Enforcer, and the halfling, had no intention of fleeing.

"Nui."

Within moments of the utterance, the High Sorceress had materialized at the queen's side within the luxurious carriage. Her dress fluttered about her heels as she dipped in a curtsy, eyes shut above the dainty smile on her lips. "You called for me, my queen?"

Ragyou's narrowed gaze remained on the veiled window, as if she might see the starlit sky beyond. The carriage was smooth, oiled wheels rotating without a sound; little more than the rhythmic thud of soldiers' boots outside could be heard from within the cabin. "We've yet some time before our arrival, yes?"

"You are correct, Your Majesty."

Ragyou swirled a goblet of spiced wine slowly in her hand, preoccupied. "Run home ahead of the entourage, would you?"

Nui looked up, smile widening at a request from the queen she so adored. "How curious… Does something strike Your Majesty's keen senses amiss?"

Ragyou's ears itched. It was not even due to the distortions of Worldflow that idly followed the kingdom's most powerful mage wherever she went. Her gaze flicked lazily toward the blond, something piercing in its depths. Her lip curled about words that came out in almost a grunt.

"*It* stirs."

Nui's smile wavered briefly with shock, a glint in her eye.

"Something transpires in the castle," the queen predicted. "Go and see what this is about."

"And should I find it necessary to do more than 'see'…?"

The queen smirked. "Go now, child. Disappoint me not."

Nui's smile only grew as Arcana burned in the air around her, spinning into a thrashing, frenzied vortex with her channeling. Light consumed her before vanishing entirely, returning the quiet of the cabin.

Ragyou let out a lengthy sigh, rubbing the tip of her ear in the wake of her departure. She took up her steaming goblet, drew in the heady scent, and drank.

None should have witnessed a space just above a part of the castle roof warp and twist inward in the night, unfurling in quavering shards

of light before the High Sorceress appeared.

Heeled shoes tapped nimbly onto the roof tiles, and she relinquished innumerable intricately woven strands of the Worldflow; Chaos arcana dissipated, erasing the distortion of space above her.

She felt the disturbances immediately, turning her head toward the front of the castle. She was not far, having materialized by a turret at a side wall bounding a yard behind the grand ballroom. "Now, that simply won't do. To have such fun at the queen's gala before the queen's arrival…"

"So you'll put a stop to it?"

She looked up, almost directly above - sighting a black-clad figure perched upon the top of the tower beside her. The speaker seemed to be following her gaze toward the castle's front, though Nui could tell only by the direction the observer faced, for the person wore a mask.

The mage smirked. "You're a long way from home, Darkstrider, and you're well out of your league."

"I'll say!" the bubbly voice chirped. "Imagine that! I got lost wandering around Lower City where I belong, and suddenly, whoops, I found myself here!" A melodramatic whine trilled into the air. "If she took issue with me, I couldn't hope to hold a candle to the High Sorceress! Oh - sorry, sorry, but I've reeeally been wanting to ask…"

Nui tilted her head at the rambling Darkstrider.

"In this day and age, do you prefer High Sorceress… or *Dragon Priest* ?"

The dainty-looking mage's lips parted amusedly. "Oh?"

The tower shattered away from her, the explosion following the point of a parasol she flicked the intruder's way.

Mako blurred to a crouched landing on the roof across from her, wind fluttering in her wake. "Oh no, now look where I am! I definitely shouldn't do something as silly as standing between a Dragon Priestess and what she wants! Uwaaah, this is a big pinch!" she whined, hostility plain in her stance as she raised a clawed gauntlet before her.

"Cheeky thing…" Nui purred. "I was so hoping to see what fun I might tease out of Miss Ryuu… but I suppose I can make you suffice. It *would* be interesting to capture one of your breed, pick you apart… and see just what makes you *tick*," she mused, eyes resting on the clawed gauntlet that sparked threateningly on Mako's hand. "If you've the audacity to steal me from a date with our dashing friend, I do pray you're entertaining enough company to hold my interest."

Mako rubbed the back of her head innocuously. "Funny thing… One time, Ryuu-chan was plenty curious about Darkstriders, too. When she hadn't seen any in years, but ran afoul of one on one of her jobs, she thought it'd make an interesting fight, and attacked. She was probably as confident as you are now! It was really startling!"

"And what did that Darkstrider do, pray tell?" Nui said pleasantly, indifferent.

"I nearly killed her!"

Nui quirked a brow.

"Her Sensei broke us up before anything bad happened, so it was all fine!" Mako assured her, nodding. "And then we realized we'd met a long time ago, and Ryuu-chan was sooo embarrassed! Small world, right?" Mako shifted her weight. "I don't know how I'd do against Ryuu-chan at full strength now - but I do know I can stop you."

Nui hummed amiably, smiling at her equally cheery foe and pointing her parasol her way. "Weaklings who don't know their place… I really do find infuriating."

~ ~

Gala Infiltration

End

She still makes the shift with relative ease. I toss a laughing toddler into the air, and a creature four times her weight falls back into my arms. It was precious when she was small, tiny wings flapping gleefully, if ineffectually, as she made the shift in the air; either form was the same weight in her infancy. But Mikisugi-san makes an apt point - it won't be possible much longer. Bah! Pox on that, I say. All the more reason to let her enjoy it while she can.

Though my knowledge on it is limited, I had *gagaku* (classical Japanese imperial court music) in mind when trying to get ideas for the orchestra's style; this is also reflected in the instruments that we've mentioned occasionally for a while now. I'm not a music or dance person at all, and it probably shows in me having not much of an idea how to describe… music or dancing ^^' I watched a lot of videos on gagaku and ceremonial dance, ryuuteki music, and re-listened to some music from Okami (which has a lot of gagaku influence in its soundtrack) for inspiration. I thought the "Ushiwaka's Appearance" theme was perfect for the type of music they'd play/that the noblesse dance to.

The Circle of Elites

Chapter 15: The Circle of Elites

Mako clashes with the Dragon Priestess Nui, who boasts unusual powers; Ryuuko and the Circle fight to free the corrupted Satsuki from Junketsu.

Sorry for the delay! A lot of 'life' stuff was going on recently (not bad stuff thankfully, just busy stuff ^^). But I also stretched out my rough draft lead in the meantime (I can't help but stay a few chapters ahead of where I'm posting). We're definitely looking at a shorter wait on the next couple chapters.

Reminder that comments are replied to (even anon ones)! If you want to see the reply to your anon comment, check the previous chapter's comment section. Thanks so much, all!

This chapter includes a good bit of magic usage, and while it's easy for me to follow that might be because I've got the Grand Arcana stuff memorized. I'd guess the most confusing thing might be distinguishing spell names from Arcanum names, though (ideally) it'll still make enough sense from context even if you just read through and figure it out over time. Still, if you want to refer to it, I'll link the Primer on the Arcane Arts post again (right click and 'view image' to see the Grand Arcana diagram full size).

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Fifteen \ The Circle of Elites

Satsuki floated a confident gaze over the combatants who had formed a loose ring around her. "Concentrated Holy potions? A praiseworthy plan," she remarked, hand rising to the Bakuzan on her back. Her gaze fell last on Ryuu. "And what a curious band that came together to execute it…"

The armored princess drew the blade, a fierce gleam kindling in her eyes. "What now? I daresay, had I been without Junketsu the victory of such a team may well have been assured. But as I am… it was perhaps a mistake to bring the thief before me."

"Arrogant wretch," Ryuu grumbled, balancing her cane in her hands. She was seeing red, Outrage pounding in her skull and burning in her gut; she itched to move, to retaliate, to see her enemy answer for for the blood already staining her face and dripping from her chin. But the others were counting on her cooperation, she reminded herself. And even through her presently muted sense of pain, she knew the kick she had taken had been no joke. If one of the Circle took a hit like that one, they could die. Good, focus. She wasn't fond of the thought of letting her temporary allies die on her watch. The gentleman's cane glimmered with her soft aura of flame, dark paint cracking on its surface as she tightened her grip, steadying. "You think that hideous set of armor will render me easy prey?"

"Is it arrogance?" the Junpakko challenged, as something combative in her reared its head. This was no good, some part of Satsuki nagged from the edge of her consciousness. The fully awakened Junketsu's spirit had meshed deeply with hers; the beast's drive to capture Ryuu for the queen had tangled with some residual, smoldering piece of Satsuki's will to best and tame Ryuu for her own. The Corruption that had taken root was now inflamed, burning richly upon her heart - and if her rational side could not effectively fight Junketsu for control, in order to at least hinder herself in combat with them… by her estimation, the Circle's battle here was already lost.

"Unfortunately, your presence provided these two souls a moment of *agreement* to alight upon - a common goal." Junketsu sneered at the thought, sending another rumble of laughter grating from Satsuki's throat. "*Ryuuko*, bearer of the blood of dragons… here to be tamed."

The thief could barely open her mouth to retort before the princess *moved* .

"Hyaaaaah!"

CLANG!

Nui's parasol deflected the blow of the sparking claw gauntlet with greater ease than a simple trinket should have managed. In spinning out of the move, the Darkstrider tumbled forward and sprang acrobatically away, twin gauntlet blades having flicked through the heavy roof tiles like butter at the High Sorceress's feet.

The place she'd gouged sparked, brightening in a delayed blink of churning power. The blond mage's smirk fell from her foe as she looked down at the roof tiles, peeved, before a short blast of energy and dust sprayed from the slice in the roof. Nui was shielding her eyes with an arm as the Darkstrider blurred through the veil of smoke, thrusting her weapon for the mage's torso.

Nui twirled nimbly aside, a syrupy smile on her face as her form seemed to flatten, vanishing with the move. Mako blinked, seeing her rematerialize twenty paces away.

I couldn't follow her movements… what strange sorcery! But it was hardly a surprise that like most battlemages, the High Sorceress would favor keeping her distance.

Nui pointed with her parasol, and a blast of Rend split the air between them, shattering the roof in a spray of careening tiles and debris where Mako had stood.

So quick! Mako wondered, rolling to her feet and clapping her hands together. In the time before the sorceress could channel another shot, Mako would focus her power and close the gap again. Energy sizzled electrically in the air around her, ramping up at a rate that would impress even most of her fellow Darkstriders. In a few short moments, she could mold enough power to-

The air rippled again, and Mako dived away as the roof shattered behind her. *No way!*

This time, she procured two throwing stars in hand as she rolled to her feet, flicking them out before launching two more. Her hands clapped together, meditative, again. The time it took the Sorceress to deal with those should be more than enough…

Fine streaks of power leapt from the Sorceress, swatting the projectiles away. The parasol's aim refocused on Mako with unnatural speed, and a wave of Rend rippled out toward her.

The Darkstrider started in surprise. But she grit her teeth and held her ground, injecting the power of her conjured lightning into her flesh. Her already sharp senses accelerated until the distortions racing toward her were a perilous few inches away.

The roof exploded as her form blurred briefly into a new location, sliding forward and to the side in a crouch as lightning trailed jaggedly in her wake. She vanished again, cutting and rolling side to side in avoidance of magic blasts as she rushed for the Sorceress who hopped hurriedly back. But the Mankanshoku woman was faster. The distance between them was cut down in leaps and bounds before finally, she sprang as if to strike head on.

The Darkstrider blurred with a burst of even greater speed. The air shuddered as she reappeared at the mage's back - punching her clawed blades *through* it.

Nui loosed a pealing scream, liquid gurgling on the sound. Wild eyes cut toward the figure behind her, and Mako felt her begin to channel

again, to sway and churn the Worldflow around them, before the sparking twin blades through the mage's heart gleamed violently as Mako lifted up, sending flashing electricity pulsing across the mage's convulsing body.

Mako withdrew her weapon as, with a curt move, she drew a knife in her other hand cleanly across the Sorceress's throat.

Scattering blood paled, taking on a curious texture as some illusion unraveled. The Sorceress's image had again contorted; her body flattened impossibly, and in a bewildered blink of Mako's eyes a mere paper tag was fluttering in pieces to the rooftop before her. Her blades were clean.

"Juuuust kidding~!"

The back of her neck prickled, and she jumped; a spiteful blast of Rend gouged through the roof beneath her, scattering heavy tiles from the rafters with explosive force. She deflected one that came sailing toward her, but a tendril of Shadow zipped through the night, stretching from the rooftop to snag Mako's ankle and swing her down. She hacked through the tendril and curled to land in a roll, rising to her feet and blinking in befuddlement at the blonde mage's grin as the line of Shadow faded.

Mako made a sound. "Oooh, but what a neat trick! I thought I had you for a second there!"

"Can it, you mongrel," Nui said. "To try to kill me so quickly… to *think* you could kill me… The nerve of it is nothing short of obscene." She poised a hand near her mouth to give a pretty laugh. "An assassination specialist, versed in anti-mage tactics like the rest of your cursed ilk… and while you seem a bit more capable than the average Darkstrider, you did *also* seem to suggest you already know you're not dealing with an average mage." She smiled in amusement, flicking up another paper tag between two fingers. "A *Dragon Priestess* is no simple mark, lowborn cur."

Mako darted closer again, and the Sorceress's image split with her blades' swing; dainty boots tapped down a ways behind her, and she looked over her shoulder. "You're great at dodging, but you can't be immortal!" she ventured. "I mean, if you were immortal, that'd be *seriously* unfair! So I'll assume you're not! And in that case, if I can get close fast enough, and hit the real you… !"

"Get close? Good plan… or, is it?" Nui raised her parasol, flicking it open above her. Its stem lengthened and widened to the size of a staff, and the canopy spun, growing insubstantial as the ribbed webbing twirled and flipped upward. "I just told you, silly thing - you're dealing with magic on a level you've never even *heard of* before!"

She grasped and drew the implement from the air, halting the twirl and flicking it sharply downward. When it lurched to halt it had transformed in material as well as construction - a solid war scythe, poised in a disarmingly laid-back stance at the petite woman's back.

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/e924/f/2017/333/7/7/high_sorceress_harime_nui__project_ryuu_ch15__by_hinata0321-dbv7689.png]

The Sorceress's smile was wide, her drawl confident and sweet.

"Surely you don't assume that anyone who can cast a few spells is *defenseless* at close range?"

"W-well I mean, for the most part- eep!" Mako squealed, dodging a frightfully quick swing of the curved blade at the polearm's end. Mako threw a kick, and the staff caught the strike before the priestess shoved her away and spun with the move, twirling the staff overhead and cracking the blade into Mako's blocking gauntlet with considerable force.

Mako grimaced as the solid metal buckled, but she slowed the attacking scythe to a halt.

The eyes that locked with hers were bubbling with glee. The Sorceress was as a predator, considering her as a wolf considers a hare, a mouse, a flea.

Mako noticed as one of several seemingly decorative, braided cords along the length of the staff beside her began to glow: strands of Worldflow were twisting through it at an incredible speed.

Ice surged from the roof just as Mako leapt clear, leaving a chaotic sculpture of jagged skewers a story high beside the priestess. Mako threw a flurry of sparking knives for cover as she spun through the air, mind reeling. Her opponent didn't play by the rules she'd learned. One strong affinity, two, in the *rarest* cases three.

Nui seemed to be up to five.

Whether it made sense or not, the Priestess was throwing around entirely too many of the Grand Arcana.

The red-eyed Ryuu leaned aside, and a blade that burned with darkness passed just before her brow.

The pillar that had been a few paces behind Ryuu split along the plane of the overhead strike before bursting outward in a crescent rain of thrown debris. The boom rang in Ryuu's ears as she hastily dodged the follow-up, eyes unblinking, and her dueling cane narrowly shunted aside strikes that fell too close for comfort.

"What manner of artifact *is* this?" Satsuki wondered, voice free of exertion and eyes no more than amused as Ryuu struggled to stave off her assault. A sudden burst of speed - an Aspect, filling her and gone in the blink of an eye - and the Bakuzan crashed down in both hands in an overhead swing, driving a shocked Ryuu nearly to her knees before she steadied under the blocking cane that shuddered in her hands. Cracks deepened along its length as it curved - and its surface shattered in thinly splintering wood, revealing the crimson Tenkantsuujou wholly intact beneath it.

"I thought as much," Satsuki mused. "Sturdy thing… but it has no guard." She turned the zweihander to glide it sharply along the staff toward Ryuu's hand.

Ryuu dropped it from that hand, and she jumped back as the princess refocused to hack for her now unguarded shoulder. The heavy Bakuzan's tip barely snipped at the fabric of her vest - and a beat later the tear widened, and a thin line of blood sprayed from the back of Ryuu's shoulder blade.

The sword is… sharper than it was before?! Ryuu thought in confusion, swinging her staff around. Her aura swirled about it as it passed; visually, the flames blossomed as if the air itself were abrasive to the striking match that was her staff, and with another swing the crackling wave of flame was slung toward the princess.

The upraised Bakuzan parted the blast before her, deflecting it cleanly to either side.

Then three of Houka's ethereal wolves, the nearest inches from her back, were cut down mid-lunge as she spun with a savage low sweep of the blade. The curling turquoise smoke of the dematerializing summons illuminated a ripple of shock in the air rushing away from her slash.

A number of bolts of magic rained toward the princess from all sides - and as many flying lances of ice intercepted them at a safe radius, the vibrant collisions setting currents of distorted magic throbbing briefly throughout the room.

A flicker of the eyes in two directions, each trailed by a flick of Satsuki's free hand. Nonon threw a blast of magic from her hand to meet a projectile just before her; the collision, too close, threw her back with a screech in a shower of crystalline fragments of ice. Inumuta, not so quick, only just escaped a lethal wound as he twisted to dodge. His eyes were round behind cracking lenses as a bolt of ice the size of a sword was lodged in the wall a ways behind him, and an inch-deep gash opened in his side.

"*Oi!* " Ryuu challenged, rushing to swing her staff again. Satsuki deflected two of her strikes before lashing back to parry a slash from Sanageyama, whose skin shimmered with a fresh charge of Swift; the weight of his blade caused the Bakuzan to recoil, and the knight's curved sword to chip.

Ryuu and Sir Uzu launched a flurry of attacks from opposite sides, and Satsuki fended them off with a frown, the Bakuzan a flash of darkness arcing brilliantly to and fro in her defense.

The knight stopped short, back straight, chin up, and face rather disconcerted as the long zweihander's tip came to pause before his throat, from a lunge. Ryuu lunged after the princess while her back was to her, but one of Junketsu's eyes, snapping shut on the *front* of a shoulder spike, parted the back of it to catch sight of her. Satsuki raised a gloved hand without looking back, catching the swing, ripping the staff away, and bashing it across Ryuu's skull. She discarded it a moment after the strike, returning the freed hand to the Bakuzan to pursue a backpedalling Sanageyama.

He prepared to swing, much too slow to parry an oncoming slash. His teeth clenched.

"Accelerate!" the knight cried, and he stumbled to recover his stance after his blade sparked against the Bakuzan, diverting it. Getting some distance, he dropped a foot back and raised his arms in a stance of attack.

"Blade of Infinity!" he yelled, as he began a powerful lunge. "*Shinsoku: Senbonzuki!* "

The sword split into a barrage of afterimages, some dozens of coincident strikes.

Sanageyama's power, as a magical dud among prodigies and a princess he can't hold a candle to… Ryuu thought, rising from the floor as she watched. She remembered her bewilderment upon encountering his technique in one of the castle's yards those weeks

ago. But she and the Circle had agreed to transparency ahead of this battle; despite the risks, the lot of jerks had disclosed to her the key tools in their arsenal so that they might better coordinate their attacks.

A fighting style built around a Gravity enchantment, courtesy of the giant… an enchantment set up so that even a 'dud' can lift it with a brute burst of ki from his hands.

Canceling the artificially increased weight of the blade let him throw countless strikes in rapid succession - or up to three strikes, he claimed, so blindingly they were effectively simultaneous.

The princess smiled.

The ringing noises of the clashing blades seemed to blend into one shrill, metallic whine. The Bakuzan angled and flowed to the precise interception of dozens of strikes thrown in the span of mere moments, peppering the air between them with starbursts of silvery sparks among blurring steel and limbs.

Ryuu retrieved her staff and moved toward them again. Sanageyama drew back into a ready stance, hands sinking subtly with the blade's restored weight.

"Shingan Tensenzuki!! " he cried, lunging and accelerating to throw three strikes - for the head, torso, and wrists.

Satsuki shifted. The Bakuzan in one hand guarded her head from the blinding blade; the armor at the back of her now-free hand's forearm shielded the strike at her wrists. The strike at her body was negated by Junketsu's solid breastplate, lowered into its path.

Even among opponents who bore the means to counter such an attack, such effortless coordination of defenses was uncommon. Sanageyama's sword hummed, shaking from striking the dragonplate and the adamantine blade so squarely.

The princess was calm, unimpressed. "If I know where the strikes will come, I don't need to *see* the blade to anticipate and counter from the windup alone."

Sir Uzu's eyes broadcast his shock as he staggered back. His ringing blade shattered suddenly, falling in several pieces toward his feet as his hands shook on the useless hilt.

"You never could best your princess in a duel," Satsuki remarked of the helpless knight, as even the dwindling augmentation of Swift dissipated from his skin. "Did you suppose that in concert with Gamagoori, you would prove impossible for even me to respond to?"

She raised her blade - and turned, prepared to meet a Ryuu who leapt from behind.

"And *you* thought yourself undetected-?"

"Gravity!" yelled another voice.

Several spots of light studded the Bakuzan's length - the many points where it had met Sanageyama's blade in the course of their exchange. The spell overtook the greatsword entirely, veiling it in pulsing light, and it began to veer downward mid-swing. The knight and Enforcer had quietly slipped another gambit into play.

But the princess was *strong* . Ryuu's confident smirk turned as Satsuki began to correct her swing, hefting the sword for Ryuu against its rapidly increasing weight.

Gamagoori channeled furiously, teeth bared. "GRAVITY!!" he repeated, desperate.

The Bakuzan's tip sparked against marble. Satsuki got only one hand clear in time; the other's fingers were smashed between the immensely heavy greatsword's hilt and the floor, and Ryuu's staff slammed across her helmet with a solid crack.

A second strike came down, bruising, beside her neck, and a third tested out her breastplate just as she tore her hand free of the sword pinning it down. The blows were stronger than a human's, but not so fierce as the god's; still the force was enough to jar her, and the gusting flames that accompanied each strike seared against the dragonplate's defense.

Excitement bubbled in Ryuu's eyes, in her roiling blood and bared fangs, as she swung again before the princess could recover, landing a stunning blow about her ribcage and another at her hip.

"A pleasure to make the acquaintance, Ancient Junketsu," she snarled, flames churning around her and leaping now in red-hot jets about her barrage of bludgeoning strikes. "Pardon me, if I must beat you and the good princess unconscious to rip you off of her-!"

A roar. Satsuki lunged within Ryuu's guard, locking her arms around the smaller woman's waist, squeezing until she yelled, lifting her from her feet, and shoving forward with her legs. They crashed together into one of the pillars, collapsing a large portion of it with a harsh scattering of dust.

Ryuu lay on the remaining stump of the pillar Satsuki had used Ryuu's back to demolish; the princess pinned her down with a strong hand at the neck of her dress shirt, raising a fist above her.

"Art thou a hatchling, but newly stumbled from the nest?" Satsuki hissed, with a strike that would have reconfigured an ordinary opponent's skull. She drew back again, knuckles wet with blood. "I did seem to hear thee quipping about thy blows holding *strength!* "

CRACK!

Satsuki's arm was buried to the elbow in the broken stump of the pillar as Ryuu shifted her head from its path. She sat up sharply, a crude headbutt meeting Satsuki about the nose, and rolled to scramble away.

The princess glowered sidelong, tore her arm free, and blinked from view in the moment before a volley of magic bolts closed where she'd been.

Ryuu's feet were hacked from beneath her by a sliding kick of terrific speed. She flailed through the air, and detected the princess who'd just blurred past materializing by her again, light trailing from about her eyes, face in shadow. A hand snapped out, locking about her ankle.

"Tora no Yousou."

Ryuu was flung upward, spinning uncontrollably in the air as she hurtled toward the ceiling - and into an axe kick across her midriff that launched her toward the floor. The princess had dashed up a pillar and leapt to intercept her.

Only Satsuki's trailing cape suggested her motion as she reappeared at the floor, an upraised fist catching Ryuu about the center of her back.

The thief's mouth stretched wide, and the domed skylight directly overhead rumbled and shattered, clear and polished surfaces deconstructing rapidly into the roughly white texture of so many finely dislocating particles of glass.

Satsuki's hand flicked open, balancing Ryuu's slackening weight briefly atop her palm before tossing her forward.

She bounced and rolled several meters, petrified by the might of the Aspect and unable to draw half a breath. She glared at the approaching princess, a harsh if empty threat in cloudy red eyes as she shook on the floor.

"Why do you not transform?" Satsuki said, having regained her normal tone. "Show me your true shape, that I may trounce *it* as well."

"Afraid I… c-can't do that," Ryuu coughed, flashing her teeth. "I t-take it… you've figured out why?"

Brow furrowing, Satsuki channeled Frost. She drew a frozen spear into being, grasping it overhead.

"… Let us see if you might reconsider."

The moment Satsuki charged, a great rectangular shield flew up into the air behind her, from a herculean throw.

It moved at amazing speed - such that Ryuu would have thought it bound to overshoot significantly. But rather than follow a natural arc, it accelerated downward, dropping more rapidly than physics should have allowed it as the Gravity spell along its spike-lined lower edge was activated.

The result was that it crashed with tremendous weight down into the cracking marble floor just before Ryuu, the princess's spear of ice shattering against its surface.

A moment after, following a rapid string of booming footfalls, the Chief of Enforcers himself barreled shoulder-first into the princess, slamming her forward into the wall that was his shield. The ground jolted at the impact. The *ground*, of all things, was what gave; chunks of the marble flooring and foundation beneath it were levered and scooped sharply upward about the portion of the shield lodged into them. Ryuu ducked, guarding her head as the princess and the shield sailed past her, and Gamagoori landed in a low stance between them and the downed thief.

"Get a hold of yourself," the Enforcer said gruffly, keeping his eyes on the princess thirty strides away. "Your mentor said a spurt of Outrage boosts your damage output and blunts your pain, but does little to mitigate the damage you *receive*, correct?"

Ryuu rose to her knees, shaking her head to clear it. Her high of Outrage was fizzling out, and after a moment's hesitance she let it

go. The tips of her ears itched, and she realized the alchemist had snuck a bit nearer; Replenishing arcana streamed and flitted from his hand toward Ryuu. It was not as effective as it would be with direct touch, but enough to take the edge off the bruising pain about her kidneys. Nodding her thanks, she managed to stand. She looked back to the towering Enforcer with a wince. "I owe you one, giant guy."

"You owe nothing to someone who once assisted in your torture," he asserted simply. He inclined a brow. "All the same, I would appreciate if you might cease referring to me as *giant guy* . My father was half-giant, so while it is not inaccurate, per se…"

Ryuu's eyes rounded. "I - I had no idea, I swear it! I mean - I get where you're coming from, I wouldn't wanna be called 'dragon gal,' s-so I mean, er…"

"Forget it," Gamagoori said to the flustered thief. "Let us consider ourselves even for now. We have a fight to win."

"Do you?" Satsuki mused. "But it looks as though you dented your armor in ramming me just now. If none of you have what it takes to put so much as a scratch on Junketsu…"

Gamagoori smirked grimly; indeed, his armor had warped from the point of contact, pinching against his shoulder. He lifted his opposite hand to tear the pauldron away. The plate screeched from loudly popping fastenings, but moved like paper in his grip. His closing hand compacted the steel before shortly tossing it aside, his ease in crushing it incongruous with the heavy clang of metal on the cracking marble floor where it landed.

"The armor is for extra weight," he reminded her, clenching his fist. "You know my skin is stronger than it."

A smirk curled the princess's lips.

Nui's movements quickened impossibly as a barrage of weapons, gardening tools, and various other metallic implements neared her; she blurred, one moment off-balance, the next upright and hacking a number of projectiles casually from the air.

"You're wondering what *kind* of mage I am, right?" the Dragon Priestess chirped, taunting. "What affinities do I hold, anyway?"

Mako hurled a fresh miscellany of weapons, cutting aside and covering as many angles as she quickly could. A wall of energy leapt from the priestess in a sphere; projectiles caught against it stalled and swerved downward before reaching her, dropping to the rooftop as if seized by an intense spell of Gravity.

"Tally them up!" Nui laughed, her form blinking disorientingly nearer. "Chaos and Frost…"

Mako blocked a swing of the war scythe with more strength behind it than normal humans possessed. It sent her sliding, digging down her heels - and a second strike, identical in form, met her gauntlet with several times the force, throwing her from her feet.

"Augment," Nui added, batting her eyes as she sent a jet of flame searing across the roof, from a swing of the scythe, without skipping a beat. "Scorch!"

This is ridiculous! Mako thought as she dodged. But paper dolls were scattering across the rooftop, shaping and popping into flawless duplicates of the priestess who flitted about. Several flew toward her, and Mako narrowly dodged and twisted from the paths of their hacking scythes; she hurled her knives and stars and other projectiles in earnest, every moment she could, fleeing the vicious copies of her foe and bombarding them with a fusillade of steel. She had begun to thin their ranks when a grand blast of flame swept the roof, wiping out the lot of them, while she leapt high in the air.

Her eyes scoured the rooftop and towers for her foe, and the dancing flames climbed and spiraled bewilderingly in her eyes,

inverting in color, for one moment mesmerizing.

"Muddle," the priestess provided, unnoticed in the air right beside her.

Mako lashed out with her energized gauntlet blades. Nui blocked at her wrist, grabbing her arm, twisting aside from a retaliatory kick, and levering her staff across the Darkstrider's skull.

She drew the black-clad woman into a partial embrace, fingers digging into her shoulder.

Mako felt her grasp on her power slip even as she tried to shape it; her energy was uprooted, pulled in a short burst into her foe. Her jaw dropped.

Impossible… !

"B-but you just… used Augment…?!"

"And now… Detriment," Nui chirped, tracing a finger down the cloth mask on her adversary's face. Chaos trailed and spread from her touch: the threads rippled, glowed, and scattered outward with a precise wave of Rend.

Her identity meant nothing to her, Mako realized. The eyes before hers were relishing in her shock, even as the Priestess took a moment to mull the power she'd just Drained.

Mako started to move - and a Rigor spell stiffened her muscles and joints as they were, the charge of petrifying magic jolting through her body from the hand that dug into her skin.

They'd begun to fall together. Nui unfurled her embrace and spun smoothly around her foe, her grip in her shoulder hurling her straight down to the roof.

"Oh," Nui hummed, landing weightlessly across from her. She stooped to daintily pluck a throwing knife from the tiles, inspecting it.

"Silly girl! You scattered so many toys around everywhere, you're lucky you didn't fall on any of them!"

Mako rose shakily to her feet, coughing as dust settled around her. "Someone who can even use Arcana that are inverse to each other… what a scary person! This is a big pinch I'm in, just for Ryuu-chan!"

"Hmm? You can try to run if you'd like, but I won't let you off easy now. You *were* entertaining," she said, clapping cheerily. "Marvelously so! I should simply *love* to learn more about you, you see…"

Mako smiled, trying to look brave. "I'd like to know more about a Dragon Priestess who can weave any of the Grand Arcana she feels like! You used Order earlier, too, didn't you? A Time spell to give yourself a moment to shift your feet, and then Augmenting with a Swift spell to deflect my knives on all sides. Maybe Sharpen at the same time, to enhance your reaction speed - so that's Lucid, too! Even mages with multiple affinities can't usually weave two at once - but then, you already have way too many 'affinities,' and you can access the opposing branches of each domain, so I guess logic is out the window, huh!"

"Trying to be cute? You know there's more to it," the priestess said, lifting her war scythe before her. The set of braided cords spaced at intervals along its length tossed in the wind. "Ordinary enchantments don't take well to cloth, but if power is shaped along the twisting paths of the weft itself as the fabric is formed, the rules may be bent. I can spin magic into braided cords and bind it for later use - or use the cords to guide and drive strands of the Worldflow for rapid spell-weaving."

"No channeling required, huh?" Mako wiped blood from her temple. "It's like using threads to simulate Worldflow 'sieves,' like the runes that power most Magelights. But to drive the Worldflow through them in force, instead of relying on whatever's flowing by…"

"*I* can grasp magic *itself*," the Sorceress declared, clenching her hand emphatically. "I have the power to grasp and direct, if not channel, pure magic - to pull and drive it through the proper braided cord. A few fine-tuning tweaks on its path and on the realized spell being released, and I unleash the desired effect."

"Holy cow!" Mako exclaimed. "You make it sound so simple! I'd reckon only someone with an incredible understanding of Worldflow and amazing skill as a mage *and* a seamstress could pull that off!"

"Flattery will get you nothing," Nui scoffed, though her eyes glinted. A barbarian, knowledgeable enough to appreciate the intricacy of her craft… She smiled. "I've spent my life tinkering *meticulously* with living bodies - the refined, well-honed circuits of the mages, the gnarled, degenerate circuits of the duds - driving magic through them and observing their function. And I learned to bind up the likeness of spiritual circuits, in physical thread."

She leveled the warscythe's blade toward her foe. "Do you see it yet? The form, and the terminus, of your and your people's struggles. You amount to little before me, and nothing at all before the might of my queen."

Mako shook her head furiously. She raised her hands with a huff, forearms crossed and fingers splayed above her in a distinctive stance. Charging energy began to spark about her body and feet. "That may be true, but I'll keep fighting! If there's a chance it'll help Ryuu-chan, I'll never back down-!"

Nui flicked the throwing knife she'd collected, with Fortified strength, with the precision of a Lucid sharpshooter. It pierced deeply into Mako's shoulder, with a crunch of parting flesh; a lethal strike had been avoided, but the knife glinted with lingering magic from the Sorceress's touch. The Darkstrider ground her teeth stubbornly as her arms began to fall, but she scraped determinedly to muster her power again.

"I've unstoppered the lid on the world's most intimate truths and secrets, divined the innermost workings of nature itself. This is the ultimate magecraft; you were a fool to think one 'elite' Darkstrider could stand against it. It's adorable, really; you really *were* entertaining, but it wasn't from being strong or anything like that!" She planted the blunt end of her weapon down before her, cracking a roof tile beneath it.

"You not only understood me to be the kingdom's greatest mage, but knew even the title of *Dragon Priest* . You knew whence my power is derived; and you, a masterless cur, thought to intervene even knowing the master, the *will*, I serve. King beasts, Godwings, *ryuu* - call them what you will. I am blessed by the most powerful race to have ever graced this world with its majesty."

The magic on the knife was unleashed as the priestess willed it - Dark arcana. A Pain spell.

Mako's stance wavered as the spell lit through her, gnawing like poison, and her throat tightened as conjured sensations pervaded her awareness. She glowered determinedly back at the Sorceress's rapt smile even as she sweated in pain, beginning to curl in on herself. She reached for the knife in her shoulder, and faltered as she shook silently, breath quick.

"And so determined to protect the one called Ryuuko… Your people have placed all their hope in one dusty old prophecy, haven't they?"

"I'm n-not… fighting for the prophecy! I'm fighting for my friend!" She sniffed. "Think about *your* friends! Are you thinking about them? Now imagine if there was another you that *wasn't* friends with them - then the current you, who likes them, probably wouldn't want the murdery you anywhere near them, either!"

"I don't *have* any friends."

"I rest my case!"

Nui tilted her head back, a finger pressed to her chin, humming cutely in a moment of thought. Then her girlish smile broadened, utterly brimming with malevolence beneath eyes round with wicked mirth, as if a mask of her own had been cast aside. She found herself with nothing to hide, before prey that was as good as dead. "Scraping to buy time? Sacrificing yourself to protect your friend? How *quaint!* "

The witch curled her fingers, clenching ever so delicately at some invisible resistance in the air, and watched the petrified girl turn pale.

"Waiting, and accomplishing nothing, seems the skill your breed prove most adept in. Your people, your ancestors, spent the centuries biding their time. The promised time at long last cometh… but I do find it curious that the one to bear the portentous name is a dragon herself. The renaissance we greet will be most hospitable to her kind; she would be mad to align herself against it."

Mako knew that the sorceress was someone who had placed uncanny emphasis on her mastery of Pain. She understood it as surely as she felt as if her joints were being hammered into by dull stakes, prying apart the tendons and splitting linked bones; her skin could have been stretching taut, shrinking until it jaggedly ripped, while rotting muscles and organs boiled beneath them. Her senses were being overloaded, drowned with false stimuli, but awareness of the illusion was not enough to stymie the horrific sensation, the panicked pounding of her heart, the primal fear of a grisly demise. She wanted to be sick. Still she refused to fall, refused to even cry out.

"Fighting to 'protect' Ryuuko this way is worthless," Nui went on snidely. "Will she thank your memory for this little farce, when it doesn't change a thing? Will she even remember you, when she never sees you again? You and I will first have to see just how much you *think* you know about Dragon Priests, but then… Your name will vanish into obscurity, like all those of your ancestors. The hour your people lift a hand against the Crown will be the hour of their demise. I shall enjoy seeing what secrets I may extract from their bodies'

workings…" Her tongue flickered across her lips, her bloodlust plain. "The powers to be realized…"

Mako scowled as the pain sharpened in a burst. She picked up her head in a furious effort, straightening out her back, though water ran down her cheeks.

"Y-you think I'm afraid of you?!" she squeaked, arms shaking in a struggle to rise. Her lips quivered, and she sniffled wetly. Her eyes did not shut, for fear of the darkness making the pain that much more real. "Patience isn't weakness - my people are plenty strong enough to fight, and survive, whatever lies ahead! And whatever *your* plans or the Crown's plans are… You're s-someone… I absolutely *can't* let near Ryuuko-chan!"

She raised her arms above her in a surge of strength, the proclamation of a fearless spirit. "*Hup-!* "

And the priestess dropped a pillar of lightning on her head.

The blast was blinding, centered easily on the upraised claw gauntlet that had begun to spark pitifully with the Darkstrider's power. It was not so momentous as the blast Nui had once used to strike down Ryuu above the music room skylight, but it would have fried any ordinary human. If the fool's heart were to stop, Nui could resuscitate and Replenish such an inconvenience to the extent requisite for her prey to undergo future experiments easily enough.

"Take a nap," she admonished smugly, watching the Darkstrider's rigid body, head tipped back, shuddering within the column of flashing light.

Mako's head rocked forward, a jovial, manic grin on her face as she locked glinting eyes surely with the mage across from her.

The Darkstrider retained her stance, crossed forearms upraised as the spell broke and the last of its power snapped into her body -

racing upon her skin, tossing her hair, arcing brilliantly in the air and circling frenetically about her feet.

"Checkmate!" she cried. "Mankanshoku Mako, firing on all cylinders!"

"*What?!* " Nui snapped. No - even if the savage had managed to absorb her attack, there was no way she could strike her. With Lucid she was too sharp, with Augment, too fast, to be caught by any direct attack. She brandished her scythe, prepared to counter whatever came. "It's useless!"

"Look around!"

Nui's face paled as she realized where they stood. In all directions, for some distance around, scattered throwing weapons protruded from the roof tiles.

The second the mage registered it, before she could drive a countering spell to fruition, Mako hopped with a click of her sandals and a sweeping flourish of her arms, and lightning engulfed the roof.

"Hibana Houden!!"

[SPARK DISCHARGE]

The world whitened with a deafening crack, power leaping and arcing instantly from blade to blade, locking the rooftop down in an all-consuming surge. The priestess's screech was inhuman, a banshee's protracted, blood-curdling wail.

The sea of arcing electricity thinned, its roar softening to a static crackle as the last of it dissipated. Mako, panting as her sandals clacked down on the charred roof, raised her head again. The harsh stench of ozone was already thinning away in the night breeze.

The High Sorceress - no, the *Dragon Priestess* - had not moved from where she stood. But her shadowed, hazy eyes were furious, seething with indignation; her luxurious hair was streaked with burns. Her clothes were tattered, and she swayed on shaking knees as a sound grated from her throat.

Mako grit her teeth and pulled the knife from her shoulder. She took a few steps and shoved off, leaping to strike.

The blade's edge met the Priestess's blocking arm, sparking where it hit.

Patches of dark, hardened scales patterned her body where the skin had burned. Her teeth were like needles, a row of pale spikes that jutted messily from her gums. The hiss that crept from her throat was raspy and harsh, an unmistakable threat.

"I'll **remember** you…"

She shoved the Darkstrider away, channeling Chaos to stumble into a pocket of twisted space that cocooned her battered form as she met it. Just as it fully enfolded her the whorling arcana unraveled, and she was gone.

Mako's shoulders shook. Then she began to laugh, pumping a triumphant fist into the air with a gleeful jump and kick. "Alright! Get zapped! Take that, ya stitch-witch… Hahahaaa… !"

In her landing she had stumbled over her feet and tipped backward, thudding flat against the rooftop as her bubbling giggles petered out. She fell asleep with her head resting in a bed of frizzed-out hair.

Mama, Papa… I think I did a good thing. I protected Ryuuko-chan…

Now it's up to Ryuuko-chan and the rest, to… protect Satsuki-hime-sama…

The room shook with a roar, and with destabilizing currents of Worldflow, as Inumuta channeled with everything he had. His voice twisted, resounding throughout the space, as his eyes seared with an aura of shadow.

Channeling Dark arcana in force?! Satsuki's eyes widened, her teeth snapping together as the Corruption spell wavered. A fragmenting sliver of her self came back to her, back to the surface, like waking from a dream. And she was once more able to recognize her corrupt self, to recognize Junketsu and to clash with him.

Good… !

Inumuta was depleting the immediate Worldflow of his affinity by drawing it all to himself, consuming and weaving Dark arcana faster than more could replace it. As he channeled, robes flaring and flapping in the tumult, hideous beasts of Shadow and tendrils of arcing power were thrown wildly out into the space behind him - and the vicinity was depleted rapidly in Dark. Junketsu scrabbled for the fading arcana, struggling to maintain his passive spell of Corruption as the air it breathed ran thin.

There was little for Junketsu to grasp: already the air sparked and stormed with Holy arcana, broken white light that crackled into being and skittered confusedly about the pillars and floor with its inverse's sudden absence.

Satsuki's own circuits, with their affinity for Holy, could balance it. In such an environment, if only the stray arcana could find her, within the cage of Dark…

Bolts of magic flew from Nonon's direction, navigating the upset Worldflow and closing toward Satsuki with terrific speed.

Stay!

DODGE!

The latter won out; Junketsu seized upon Satsuki's instinct to dodge, forcing them to jump as the magic blasts dashed the floor below.

The others were rushing toward her as she rose - Gamagoori from one side, Ryuu and Sanageyama from the other. Junketsu's attention was already split between maintaining his Corrupting Touch and driving Satsuki's actions. One hit to rattle his focus, and Satsuki was certain she could draw in the Holy arcana around them, nullify his spell, and break free.

For one crisp moment, dominance swung back her way: when Junketsu sought to channel Frost in their defense, Satsuki diverted his intent, breaking the stalemate of will the moment if occurred by forcing through an attempt to channel *Holy* instead.

She went rigid as a minuscule wisp of soft white arcana leapt through a weak point in the Corruption spell, finding a path to her. The influx strengthened as the unbalanced Arcanum excitedly recognized her touch, discovering and rushing to her as an outlet that welcomed it.

She let control rock back into Junketsu's court as Gamagoori was reaching them. Junketsu accepted, eager to fight off the Holy arcana beginning to purge his curse, before realizing his mistake as the giant's fist swung down.

Inumuta's furious howl cut out in a gasp of pain. His overloaded circuits jolted his body as his channeling sharply ceased; his eyes were dim as his dark aura broke, and blood was running from his ear, nostrils, and lips as he slumped into Shirou's lunge to catch him. He'd given out, at the strain.

The dark beings behind them, the spells Houka had so rapidly woven, unraveled the moment his hold on them snapped. The unbound Dark arcana sprang elastically to rejoin the flow, surging across the room in a brilliant flare of crashing light and shadow.

The stray Holy arcana that had manifested were rebalanced, lost to Satsuki's fleeting grasp. Her eyes darkened.

She ducked aside. Her arms locked about Gamagoori's elbow as his fist began to pass her, and she swung him around with a yell, releasing to hurl the shocked Enforcer into the oncoming Ryuu and Sir Uzu. The three went sailing away, landing in a sprawling heap.

As Satsuki landed, her shoulders shook with laughter. "Close… so close! Was that according to plan? The Summoner was prepared to kill himself with so reckless a stunt!"

Sanageyama elbowed Gamagoori with a grimace as the giant clambered off of him and Ryuu, and the three got to their feet.

"*Any* of the Circle would lay down our lives to stop you!" Gamagoori said, serious. On the back line, Nonon stood protectively a ways before the alchemist and summoner, expression grim; Iori rested a healing hand on Inumuta's chest, teeth clenched bitterly as his friend blinked in a daze. The blond man nodded softly once, watching moisture collect about the edge of a bloodshot eye.

"It's true, Princess."

A harsh sound. "Foolish… Is Kiryuuin Satsuki not the master of this circle of elites? If I desire to tame the halfling, what audacity you have to stand in my path."

"C-come, now," Inumuta croaked from Iori's lap, trying to sound cheerful despite the pain, and fear, in his murky green eyes. His voice was low. "We know the princess as well as anyone. Your present behavior amounts to that of an imposter, plain as day… Or do you presume us dim enough to abide the orders of a puppet wearing Satsuki-hime's face?"

"She was fighting to break through, with the chance the Dog there gave her. She's in there, and we're taking her back - you hear that, wretched armor-spirit?" Nonon spat. "If you fancy you've won out

over her will, or that it's only a matter of time, you've yet to learn a thing about her - about the person whose hand I promised never to let go of! The castle in her mind will not fall; she defends it as we speak. So while she repels your advance, it falls to us to drag the fool besieger down!"

Sanageyama smirked in agreement, drawing a dagger. "You're not the ultimate enemy she pursues - not even close. We walk beside Satsuki-hime so that we can stand with her before that enemy, one day! We channel our lives into being worthy of that right! The princess is the one who will stand upright as her strength breaks the crashing tides of the most powerful forces this world has ever seen! Ancient dragon or whatever, you're a sarden fool if you think she'll be made to bow to you or anyone else!"

"We serve Kiryuuin Satsuki, as well as her ideals!" Gamagoori said, channeling Augment. A Fortify spell danced upon his skin, amplifying his body's already incomparable strength. He sank into a stance, hefting one greatshield from his back while drawing back the other - and slammed both down, cracking the earth with a rallying boom.

"If the noble ideals that drew us to her side are sullied, we are obligated to fight! Corruption has twisted you into a MOCKERY of the good princess! As the true Kiryuuin Satsuki would demand, we will bring down ANY who would threaten her ambitions - even if said threatener is Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime herself!!"

He bent his legs, braced his shields, and leapt with a mighty roar. Spinning twice in the air as he descended toward the princess, he smashed the colossal shields down with a yell.

"You're too slow, Gamagoori," Satsuki noted, standing twenty paces behind him as he raised his head in the clearing dust. "Swift doesn't take well to your own body, does it? Only Fortify. But all the strength in the world is worthless if-,"

The one-fourth giant swung his arm back - with such strength, such speed, that the shield he held cut out a sizeable chunk of a pillar at

his side, sending it hurtling into the princess.

The hunk of stone shattered upon raised gauntlets, knocking her back. She thrust a palm forward, and a shockwave rattled against a quickly raised shield, driving the Enforcer's heels into the cracking floor.

Gamagoori swung his feet onto the wall he neared, balancing briefly by his hold on shields that rested on the floor - and shoved forward in a burst of explosive strength. In the blink of an eye he was meeting Satsuki squarely with a greatshield's strike, setting a current of Rend rippling across her armor's plates. Another eyeblink later, he was crashing with her into the wall that had been dozens of meters beyond, sending dust sailing outward into the room. Wind raced, heavy tables jumped or overturned behind their flying contents, and unsteady pillars fractured and crumbled in places, at the shock.

Ryuu held up an arm, shielding her eyes. *Bloody hell! How are we even supposed to help him?!*

He bellowed and drew back, striking with one shield and then the other, shattering more of the wall and floor around his target with each blow.

Against armor of Junketsu's level, the quick strikes of Ryuu's light staff or Sir Uzu's curved, slashing sword were of limited effect, even if they hit. At close quarters, one of few means of dealing significant damage to the dragonplate's wearer was with sheer *impact* . And with the physicality to strike with shields that weighed more apiece than the average man, impact was something Gamagoori could produce.

"Strength that would buckle my armor will never scratch my body!" the man declared, voice a roar over the crashing onslaught of strikes. "And strength that would wound this body will NEVER shake this heart!!"

A backhand swing intercepted a strike with a heavy clang, sending a shield sailing from his grasp; a desperate kick met the other shield's retaliation, throwing his arm wide as he fought to keep his hold, and stabilized it again.

"Expect no less of the fortitude of the man who presumes to call himself your shield! SATSUKI-HIME!"

Satsuki rolled clear of the swing of the recovered shield, and Frost arcana erupted from the cracked flooring around the Chief of Enforcers. It began to entomb him in ice that spread and solidified rapidly from the feet up, but reached only his shoulders before he thrashed free with brute, ferocious strength.

Amid scattering shards of ice he saw his lunging foe, and swung his shield out in a cutting motion.

Satsuki dodged under the sweeping edge, ramming her fist into his abdomen with a yell. Gamagoori's heavy armor dented only slightly, but the life force injected into the blow rattled the air in a straight line from his back.

He gasped, shaking once, beginning to curl forward. A second blow in the same place, ruthless, punched through his armor to slam deep into his gut.

The towering Chief of Enforcers sank to his knees. Eyes rolling back, he swayed and fell flat with a boom of dead weight.

"You fool, Gamagoori… You clouded your own vision with shed tears, for striking me?" Satsuki scoffed, bloodied but still alert. Her brow furrowed briefly as she began to channel Frost. "This has gone on long enough."

"No!" Sanageyama shouted. He had only prepared to move when he blinked in astonishment, finding the princess had vanished in a scattering of dust. His eyes darted to keep up as she rushed nearer, cutting side to side. She was in front of him with her hand on his,

twisting his wrist until he cried out, dagger falling from his grasp - and the heel of her palm collided with his jaw, throwing him off his feet and shooting the focus from his eyes.

Ryuu saw Iori starting to weave healing magics - and tore off toward him, too slow. The summoner leaning on him flung up an arm with a yell, catching a number of shards of ice just before the shocked blonde's chest. Inumuta's face twisted with a hoarse, stifled cry of pain, and Satsuki was behind them, grabbing the healer's shirtneck and slamming him to the ground, kicking out Inumuta's feet, clutching his hair, and knocking his head to the floor as well.

When Satsuki blurred toward Nonon, Ryuu was there to intercept her, cutting into her path with a swing of the Tenkantsuujou. Satsuki caught the polearm in hand, and as Ryuu threw a punch for her side she shifted so that Ryuu's knuckles met her breastplate with a crunch.

Ryuu tensed, throat tightening on a sound of pain. Satsuki released the staff and grabbed Ryuu by the wrist, stepping and hurling her aside. "Wait your turn."

Jakuzure stepped back, well aware she wouldn't have time to weave a spell as her old friend walked calmly closer. "Satsu-,"

The princess's knee met her midsection with a thud, shaking her. The Muddler curled forward, at first slowly, and dropped to the floor.

At a creaking noise, Satsuki turned her head. Ryuu was rising from a table she'd crashed through, unsteady in her movements. Satsuki sneered.

"It would appear you're the only one who can still move," she said. "I don't suppose you'd show me your true form, now?"

Ryuu glowered, lifting an expensive-looking bottle of liquor from the wreckage of the table. The lapping flames of a candle had taken to a part of the tablecloth; she cracked the bottle over it, and the flames

reared and spread. She pressed her hand to the burning table, and the fire vanished in a ring about where she touched. "You'd suppose right."

Watching her, Satsuki had retrieved the Bakuzan from where it had fallen. It rose easily in her hand; with Gamagoori out cold, the Gravity spell over it had broken. "Come, now. With so powerful a name, surely you've no desire to perish without a fight?"

Ryuuko lowered her head, donning a crooked smirk as she held her adversary's gaze. "I can't die here. There's a big-hearted mutt back home waiting for me."

Humor danced in Satsuki's eyes as she leveled her blade toward her foe. "On your guard."

~ ~

The Circle of Elites

End

Ryuuko can glide. A fantastic development, truly, but how I do wish she had not first demonstrated it upon suffering an impulse to fling herself from a bloody cliff *in the midst of our morning hike. Thankfully I did not quite enter cardiac arrest. In fact, following my swiftest descent down the trail to date, I found her in impeccable shape at the floor of the valley, albeit crying for having 'lost' me.*

-The Nui illustration's a little misleading, but she does still have both eyes! I was going to do a dramatic glint for the shadowed eye but couldn't get the effect to work out, so I removed it.

-I would choose as the chapter theme (or more particularly, Mako's theme) Wagakki Band's *Kishikaisei.* 'Recovery from a Hopeless

Situation' fits, right? The official video is available on Youtube, though the music video version is a bit shorter than the full version.

Fire and Ice

Chapter 16: Fire and Ice

"Once, you told me you can't always play not to lose - *you* fancied playing to win. You fight with the power you have, without restraint or hesitation. Show me this, Ryuuko. Show me that you're not the prey."

Happy almost New Year!

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Sixteen \ Fire and Ice

Ryuu staggered as her staff deflected the black blade. The crimson *jou* bent without breaking under a string of cold, relentless strikes, but Ryuu backpedalled messily, a snarl on her lips, arms protesting each time the weapons connected between her and the Kiryuuin.

The corrupted princess had been bloodied by Gamagoori's attacks; the thief's sharp eyes may have even gleaned signs of pain from her foe's movements. If nothing else, that the battle had dragged on was perhaps burdening the princess with the bodily strain of maintaining her armor's superhuman power. But even as she slowed down, she seemed to remain in better shape than the thief who found nary a moment to breathe, much less to consider returning attack.

"You can't hold your ground this way, can you?" Satsuki goaded, sweat glistening on her face. Ryuu hacked to repel a slash of the

Bakuzan, but as the shorter woman moved in Satsuki lunged and rose in a curt hop, leading with her chest to confront Ryuu with a blow of Junketsu's solid breastplate about Ryuu's chest and face.

The thief was kicked upward by the stunning, full-body blow - and the princess locked an arm around Ryuu's waist with a shoulder at her abdomen, head against her side, and plunged to slam her back into the floor. Ryuu yowled. As her adversary hopped back, the downed woman curled on her side with a grunted curse. The armored warrior's advantage in weight, size, and strength was unquestionable. "As a human, you can't begin to match me any longer."

Ryuu grimaced, pushing to her knees. In answering, she found the truth in her words as she spoke them. "I'd sooner *die* than be a puppet of the Crown."

"So you would sooner die, than fight for your life? Than fight for our glorious queen, should fate decree? Pathetic, fledgling beast. Thou'rt a tragic waif indeed - spirited from the cradle and rais'ed among humans, confined to the meagerest aspirations, and made sympathetic to a *human* cause! And now thou clingest to thine unsightly guise? Thou'rt a *ryuu* already tamed!"

Satsuki's speech patterns had shifted as she spoke. The princess paused briefly, wavered in a moment of confusion.

Ryuuko took the opportunity to thrust her staff forward, bidding it to extend and jab sharply into one of Junketsu's eyes on a spiked pauldron.

The princess yelled, the sound accompanied by a disembodied screech. Ryuu was already withdrawing her weapon, dashing forward to attack.

Though shaken, Satsuki evaded her swing with relative ease, grabbing her arm and throwing her at a pillar. Ryuu's body turned so

that her feet met it, and she was poised momentarily before shoving toward the princess again, spinning into a flying kick.

"Who I wanna fight for is my own sarden business!"

Satsuki dodged with a backbend, springing from her hands and recovering her stance as Ryuu met the ground in a tumble, rolling to her feet across from her.

Ryuu turned in a crouch, drawing back the Tenkantsuujou in both hands as she faced Satsuki again, panting for breath and gritting her teeth. As she began to swing, to unleash the strength coiled in her body, the staff extended rapidly, stretching out twenty meters, thirty, farther still into the air behind her. Sharp teeth parted around a harsh yell, and she swung the staff in a flashing arc of speed.

The curving staff locked for a split-second against a guarding forearm with a crack of force, beginning to push Satsuki to the side, rocking her head and sending a surprised noise stuttering from her throat. Then she was swatted to a distant wall - and the pillars that had remained intact in the radius of the sweeping strike split and ruptured violently along a plane, collapsing into the battered room in a wave of tumbling stones as the staff returned to form. A crackle and groan issued from the ceiling, and the room was peppered with bits of falling debris.

Ryuuko swore, eyes locating the unconscious members of the Circle. No harm for now-

A trio of ice shards sped from the dust where the princess had been thrown; Ryuu caught two with her staff, but one stuck her in the arm, causing her to wince.

Sensing a presence behind her, she turned - and received a sword hilt to the side of her ribs. A dull crunch sounded, and she choked back a cry. A punch to her cheek sent Ryuu spinning backwards into the air, and she bounced and rolled to a halt, a hand grasping

numbly at her face as she rose and stumbled warily back before slipping, toppling to one knee.

"Do you hold out for fear of being used against your allies?" Satsuki asked. "It burns in your eyes - the urge to truly fight. To restrain your true form is hardly the behavior of a monster who would espouse to care only for herself. No; this is but the loyalty of a dragon ruined by her upbringing. Thy hide is soft skin; thy wings, clipped by thine own hand." Quiet anger tinged her voice; her face was harsh in its disapproval.

Ryuu scowled, rising defiantly again. "You're about the last person I wanna hear that from, just now! Are the bars so close around you, you forget your own prison to lecture me about mine?!"

Satsuki gathered her strength and closed the distance between them with a leap, meeting Ryuu's sternum with a snapping kick that launched her in a straight shot to the wall. Ryuu struck with a boom, cracks spiderwebbing out upon the buckling surface before she bounced forward from it again, blinking around stars. Staying on her feet as she landed, she sighted her foe on the approach, cocked back her arm, ground her feet down, and swung for Satsuki's face with a yell.

Satsuki flowed around the strike, turning away and lowering as she did - to shatter Ryuu's momentum with an armored elbow to the solar plexus.

The blow took the wind out of her, turned her yell to a throaty hiss. She was frozen, left with her jaw agape as a large area of the wall behind her rattled, dented sharply, and shattered away from a shockwave.

Ryuu's eyes started to tip back. She slumped past the motionless princess, falling from the elbow that had smashed her stomach in, and wrapped her arms across herself as she hit the ground, eyes screwing shut.

Satsuki smoothly resumed full height, turning her head. She glowered down her nose at the halfling, who hoarsely, brokenly sputtered and wheezed.

"Do you understand yet?" the Kiryuuin asked, her imperious voice as steel. "A crumpled heap on the floor is a fitting posture, for one so piteously devoid of resolve. You suppose you can play a 'game' you've detached yourself from, but in truth you are *empty* - and oh, so weak. Our world is ruled by strength, Ryuuko. This…?" She quirked a brow, disdainful. "This is the difference between *you* and *me* ."

Ryuu retched, leaving flecks of blood on the cracked marble just beneath her lips. Trembling, she turned her face from the floor, lifting her head enough to glower back at the princess with a squinted, waveringly cold eye.

Frown deepening, Satsuki bent to seize her ankle. "Do you lack even the aimless rage that once so vibrantly illuminated you? However dull your claws, you should instinctively wish to rise to the challenge of one who would seek to tame you. *Sharpen* yourself against me. Hone the steel of your resolve… or *shatter* ."

She had dragged the thief up with one hand, eliciting a croaking sound of protest. Ryuu still cradled her middle as she hung upside down in the air, her breath short and uneven through her teeth, her nose clogged with blood. Satsuki turned, swinging and slamming her back-first to the floor, with horrible strength. Ryuu's mouth opened with a rush of air, but hardly a sound escaped her.

"Your vitality is the only impressive thing about you," Satsuki scoffed, seeing Ryuu was still, if barely, conscious, blinking in a daze. "Once, you so confidently told me you can't always play not to lose - *you* fancy playing to win. If you have the power to fight, you fight for yourself, no matter the consequences. Show me this once more."

She raised her hand, and Frost arcana solidified into a shower of needles that peppered Ryuu's arms, causing her to yowl. Satsuki

sneered, oily malevolence stewing in her Corruption as she lifted the halfling now by the tattered cravat at her neck and shook her gently before her, toying. Ryuu bared her teeth at the provocation, eyes sharpening as an animal hiss rose from her throat.

"Come, cowering little *ryuu* . Have you but flimsy threats to offer? Meet my challenge with fire and wrath. *Punish* me for my impudence… if you can," she added, supercilious.

Ryuu snarled, baring her teeth and yelling in her enemy's coldly smiling face as she grasped at Satsuki's arm, despite the blood trickling languidly from her own.

"Oh?" Satsuki was undaunted. "But that's right… you're too cold, aren't you?"

Ryuu's rage melded into confusion, and pain, as dark energy coursed from Satsuki's hands against her, drilling into her shoulder and chest, gnawing, burning through every shred of her awareness. She screamed aloud as black flames seemed to arise on her skin. It was hot, she registered in her panic - it was too hot, it would melt her, blacken her flesh and boil her alive-

Her heart shook, and her eyes squeezed shut and snapped open again, irises flashing red, pupils narrowing and lengthening to fine slits as she took hold of her means of escape.

She made the heat her power.

The Kiryuuin princess was whispering to her, fierce eyes centimeters from her own, forehead pressing against hers.

"Ryuuko… Can you show me that you're not the prey?"

In a moment of supreme focus, a shuddering calm before an eruption, Ryuu reached forward, hand latching roughly about the princess's chin and face as she looked down at her. She met

Satsuki's dark smile with one of her own, confidence gleaming in her smoldering eyes as low, gravelly laughter rumbled up her throat.

Matoi Ryuuko was no one's prey.

*"Let's see how that armor of yours stands up to my **fangs**."*

And Satsuki was thrown away from her by an explosion of howling steam.

The sound that sprang forth was savage - a scream that became a screeching, grotesque roar amid the lashing winds. Satsuki's eyes were wide in excitement even as she shielded her face, heels sliding back.

Two murderous, burning crimson orbs lit up, brilliant in rage and fiendish glee. They shone keenly through the clearing mist - and shut as the towering, midnight blue beast flared expansive wings and stretched her long neck forward and down, tongue curled and rows of sturdy fangs bared, to unleash a long and resounding roar upon the princess below.

Satsuki held her ground, the Bakuzan steady before her. Her cape thrashed at her back. All around and behind her, the floors raced with cracks, debris was torn and flung away, and gale winds charged with tempestuous power beat and rattled the air.

Her lips ticked up at one corner, as blue light danced upon her skin.

"*Sheer Cold!* "

She drove her blade into the floor, kneeling as her channeling was completed. A wave of vibrant Frost burst forward, shattering into a blanket blast of wrathful cold. Ryuu flinched as it met her with a slap - and a series of blasts followed without pause, battering and quick, scattering smokily across her scales but drilling the cold into her bones. Her hide was dusted in spiderwebbing patches of frost, and ice clung to her nostrils, jaws, and mane.

The dragon screeched, tossing her head with a huffing snort, stepping back. Narrowed eyes locked on the princess again, as a row of icicle spears rose from the floor behind the Kiryuuin. The lances angled and shot upward - crashing not into Ryuu, but a number of points in the ceiling of the ballroom. Supports. Already, too many pillars had fallen; cracks spread from the weight of the largest chandelier overhead, and it lurched with a groan.

Ryuu stepped sluggishly and launched forward with a roar - too slow to escape the plummeting magelight chandelier or the massive portions of the caving ballroom ceiling and roof that came crashing down behind it.

The raining stone outweighed even the enormous Ryuu; it caught her mid-leap, sending her to the floor with a screech of protest. Her voice was drowned in the rolling avalanche of falling brick, until dust billowed thickly into the air around where she'd stood.

A mountain of rubble obscured the beast, and the room was quiet but for sifting trails of dirt and the odd falling stones and roof tiles. A triumphant laugh husked from Satsuki's throat as she began to walk forward through the hanging dust.

"Did you suppose I would be petrified in fear, by an overgrown lizard?!" she yelled, clapping her hand to her breastplate with a thud. Boastful, she threw out her arms. "Have you any idea how long I've prepared for such an encounter-?!"

A bellow of defiance shook the room, and the towering mound of rubble scattered like light pebbles. Ryuu surged upward beneath it, rearing on her hind legs as her wings thrust out. The beast could have been a sculpture of rampant, frenzied power, muscles rippling beneath her scaled hide and burning steam belching from her nostrils and throat.

Her forelegs fell again, shoulders sinking as they braced and bent. Ryuu coiled muscular hind legs and leapt, wings swatting down in concert with the shove to fling her high into the room. Her immense

form spun and fell, wings now thrusting her downward in one sharp move as she swung a foreleg's splayed claws for the princess.

Satsuki flipped back in the air; she marveled as the flooring was demolished, scattered in a wave from where the dragon struck. As she sailed back, she took on a tremendous surge of Frost arcana, sending a fan of fine lances of ice speeding from the space behind her.

The dragon Ryuu raised her head with a grumble, nostrils flaring and power glinting in a rolling wave up along the scales of her neck. She swung her head from left to right, maw pouring a crackling spray of flame in a searing red arc to vaporize the spears of ice. As the princess landed, sword sheathed, she drew back an oversized arrow of Frost in a smoothly unfurling, ethereal bow. The projectile shot forward, kicking Satsuki backwards with its release just as her feet met rugged ground, heels kicking up a burst of dust.

A jet of flame shot out to meet the arrow - and Ryuu snapped her head aside and down with a toothy snarl, hacking the glowing blue arrow decisively apart with one of her horns as it broke through the flames.

Satsuki dodged the remainder of the missile of flame in a leap of advance; she drew her sword as Ryuu lunged, snapping her fangs for her in a serpent-like strike. But Ryuu was not fast enough to catch her, misreading the speed of her ascent as Satsuki turned in the air, sailing above Ryuu's mouth and alighting smoothly with one foot upon the top of her snout. Ryuu growled, eyes blazing wickedly against the frozen ferocity of the princess's arrogant sneer.

Satsuki's other foot swung down, slamming into Ryuu's nose. The great beast's red-and-yellow eyes rounded, and a surprised screech escaped her fangs as her head dropped straight to the floor beneath the bruising wallop of force.

As the princess fell, she flipped and plunged her zweihander down for the top of the stunned dragon's snout; Ryuu leapt back with a

kick of her wings, evading. She lunged forward again, snapping unsuccessfully with her teeth, spitting jets of flame, leaping and rolling from erupting pillars of ice and charged slashes of the Bakuzan. The two warred with all they had left, fully respecting the other's power and the weapons they held; a direct blow of the greatsword could very well tear through the dragon's armored hide, and the beast's fangs, if allowed to catch the more agile warrior, would almost certainly split and pierce Junketsu's plates. Each combatant was a force, each aware of how readily a misstep could prove fatal. So for a short time the woman and dragon engaged in a furious dance, neither able to press an advantage long enough to claim the upper hand.

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/39be/f/2017/364/3/6/dragonbattle1800_by_hinata0321-dbye1td.png]

When a furious burst of ki repelled her flames and pushed the dragon away, Ryuu braced her legs and swung one broad wing harshly, launching a buffeting blast of wind into her smaller foe to send her tumbling back. The beast coiled her muscles and pounced again, and Satsuki leapt aside from her fangs - but Ryuu spun sharply away as she passed, the length of her curving body whooshing by before her solid tail cracked into Junketsu's plates, swatting the airborne princess with colossal force.

Satsuki's ears buzzed as she felt a wall give way behind her, felt a rush of cold night air. She struck heavily down in the courtyard before the castle, denting the earth with each bounce as she rolled to a stop. Junketsu was screeching with indignation as they rose, hot pain wracking their form; Satsuki wheezed and roughly coughed, blood churning hotly in her throat, but her eyes were severe in their fury. Forcing a guttural growl through grating teeth, she raised her head.

The dragon burst from the ballroom's roof with a titanic crash of scattering masonry, head rising and wings flared, crimson and blue-black mane rippling wildly on her back. She hovered and roared,

eyes wide in fury, and sent a magnificent river of flame surging down toward the gardens below. Satsuki thrust her sword forward; water from the nearby fountain flung itself out before her in a rushing, splintering pillar of ice, meeting the flames in that space only in a crackling explosion of heat and mist.

Satsuki grinned, standing unharmed as the courtyard lit up around her. Her shoulders shook with greed, her words dredged in dripping malice.

"Good, good! Come, strike at me with all your might, that I may drive it into the ground! *Ryuuko!* "

The beast screeched and roared in answer.

"No, no, no… !"

Mikisugi's face was pale as he watched Ryuu roar, the nightmarish sound thrashing the evening air. In the chaos of the gala's evacuation he had easily slipped onto castle grounds, scaling an outer turret and hiding there to observe. Begrudgingly or not, he'd even retrieved an unconscious Darkstrider from a castle roof after witnessing her driving off the High Sorceress from afar; the Mankanshoku girl now rested against the crenelated stone wall, snoring peacefully in a pocket of shadow where the looming firelight did not reach. But his intervention in Ryuu and the Circle's mission was something he had dearly hoped would go unrequired.

His weapon of choice shook in his hand. He reached into his coat, hand pausing on a particularly unusual cartridge for the magic pistol.

One imbued with drakefell extract.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," he hissed, a curse spitting from his lips as he withdrew the ammunition, loading it into the gun. The Sensei was little more than a magical dud, but even a dud could activate a well-designed, one-trick enchantment, could be deadly

with the right weapon and the skill in handling it. Aim. Flare your power. Hit the mark. With a burst of energy from his hand, he could send a fine bolt of Ravage arcanum searing from the enchanted chamber.

Propelled by such a magic bolt, the drakefell bullet should pierce even a dragon's strong hide.

"You said you wouldn't transform, damn it!"

Ryuu could not fall into the hands of the Kiryuuin.

But the Sensei knew not whether a round of this potency would change Ryuu back into a human, or simply prove fatal to a dragon of her size.

He was responsible for her. The council, the commanders, had left this countermeasure to him.

Shoot now, and Ryuu would at best not triumph, at worst be killed. Wait for the mad Kiryuuin to tame her, and if the drakefell round indeed failed to kill… the Crown would have a mature dragon at its disposal, to rain terror and devastation upon its foes from the kingdom's skies.

He started to raise the gun toward the hovering drake. Aim. She would never defeat the Kiryuuin princess; no one could, with the armor she wore. The Junpakko could cut down the gods themselves for crossing her.

"You would sooner die than be enslaved, right?" Jaw clenched, he leveled the gun toward his disciple, distraught. Fire. *Fire.* He could do it. It wasn't nearly so difficult, he told himself, the way she was now; she was monstrous, enormous and strong. "Forgive me… !"

But the girl behind the beast, with her crooked smirk… her weight in his arms, a child's weight, a teen's weight, a young woman's weight, as he carried her from one mishap or scrap after another… her

glowing at his praise, whether as they leaned over a reading workbook or as his dueling cane cracked against her staff in a spar…

Water arced down his face, from one of a pair of cringing eyes.

She needed him to trust her.

"RYUU!" He screamed, throwing down the pistol and slamming his hands onto the stone wall before him. 'Fly away,' he meant to shout.

"Ryuuko! *Don't you dare lose to her!!* "

The beast's eye might have flickered toward him, glinting with surprise.

Then she snarled, rushing toward the princess in the courtyard below.

Satsuki leaped and rolled away as Ryuu crashed down, rattling the earth with her weight and sliding to send dirt, stone, and uprooted hedges spraying out in her wake.

The dragon crouched, hackles raised, a low sound rumbling steadily from her throat. Saliva oozed from about her deadly fangs and flicking tongue as she snarled, clawing at the dirt with one foreleg. When she flared her wings, blocking out much of the sky in Satsuki's view, the challenge in the eyes locked on those of the princess could not have been clearer.

"Let us settle this, then!" Satsuki said, drawing her blade into a ready stance. Darkness swirled about her before blazing forbiddingly from the surface of the greatsword. "COME! DRAGON RYUUUKOOOOOOO!!"

A beast's roar met her cry of battle, and Ryuu's expansive wings, billowing with air, angled down and began to thrust powerfully back.

She launched forward with all her strength, and Satsuki leapt to meet her.

But as Ryuu's wings swept back, mist rose to the surface of her scales, popping and skittering wildly.

From the bursting cloud of steam, propelled by the beat of wings mighty enough to fling a several-ton reptile into the sky, the human Ryuu shot like a bullet. Human, but for the horns cresting her skull.

Satsuki's eyes grew. She had been waiting for the most effective timing, to unleash the full might of the Aspect with her strike. But the change in mass had caused Ryuu to accelerate to many times the speed of her initial lunge. The princess wouldn't be fast enough.

Tora no Y-!!

CRACK!

Ryuu met her at breakneck speed with a shoulder to her breastplate, snaring the thrust of the Bakuzan in her horns. Satsuki's armored form shot backwards beneath the force of her now smaller foe, her focus wavering at the impact. And Ryuu wrenched her head strongly, horns twisting the greatsword from her grasp.

The air about the point of their collision throbbed and kicked. Gradually they parted as they flew, Satsuki crashing down on her back and rolling as Ryuu landed and slid on her feet.

Impossible… !

Teeth cracking in outrage, the princess dug her fingers into the dirt, glove shredding and nails tearing, beginning to sit up as she ground to a halt. Ryuu was bearing down on her, hand drawing back. Satsuki formed a fist, began to tense and rise.

The Bakuzan that Ryuu had flicked into the air fell into Ryuu's grasp, leveled neatly at Satsuki's throat.

The princess froze, and the sword fell a hair's breadth from her neck. The thief stood above her with a wild grin, panting but triumphant, with adrenaline still sparking in her eyes; she held the greatsword easily in one hand, while the other arm hung limply from a broken shoulder.

"Go on, then," Satsuki said in a moment. "Take your victory."

Ryuu shook her head slightly.

A quick move, and the thief had pushed her to the ground and straddled her waist, the flat of the blade resting across Satsuki's throat. The princess was fearless, eyes chilled as she resigned herself to the killing stroke. Junketsu wanted to struggle, to fight, however abysmal their odds of changing the outcome any longer. Satsuki would not have it. She had been bested, and would at least die now on her own terms, with some semblance of dignity.

Ryuu bared her teeth as she leaned over Satsuki, holding her eyes intensely. The halfling's scorching gaze was sharp enough to petrify, to bind and devour whatever lay in her path.

"*Junketsu*," Ryuu growled, surprising her.

Satsuki's heart shook.

A blink of the eyes, and here Ryuu was, standing with an unfamiliar castle wall at her back.

In the scarred field before her, two beasts of light were at war. A blue-white dragon with searing red eyes, and a smaller white tiger, ferocity in its every move.

The combatants were weary, but madly desperate. After the dragon shook off the tiger's claws and bit its strong neck, it hurled it dozens of meters to the castle wall.

Ryuu's hair jumped in the wind as it struck the wall beside her. It was a bloodied princess, rather than a tiger, that fell to the ground, settling on one knee at Ryuu's side as she glowered at the wary, growling Junketsu across from them.

"You've been fighting here… all this time?" Ryuu asked, not looking at her.

Satsuki nodded slightly, tired eyes sharp. "Since he is a spiritual being… he can only be t-tamed in such a place as this…"

"How long can you keep this up? This battle of will."

The princess struggled to rise. "Y-you have… no business here, Ryuuko. Time is short. I cannot hold him back forever… Junketsu has long since been tamed by the queen. Try as I might, it is probably impossible for one Kiryuuin to wrest him from another without her willingly relinquishing him to me. So, before my time runs out…"

Ryuu realized where she was going. "The mighty Princess Kiryuuin Satsuki would settle for death at the hands of a thief?"

"You bested me in fair combat," Satsuki said. Her aura fluctuated, attempting to build up the great tiger again. "There may be no better person to slay me. I'm grateful to you… for having fought alongside my Circle this night. You've spared one of them the burden of delivering the coup de grace."

"A lowly criminal, to close the book on the rabid Junpakko… I dunno about that, Kiryuuin." Ryuu tried at a roguish smile, but the result was halfhearted. "Whether it had to be done or not, I bet the Circle Jerks won't be terribly pleased with me after the fact. I wonder if they'll still fork over my reward…"

Satsuki smirked wryly, grim. She saw through the younger woman easily; Ryuu was upset, but unwilling to show it. Compassion, for the Junpakko… the child really was too kind in heart.

"Do you understand, Ryuuko? The risk is too great, if Ragyou can gain control of me with the power I now hold. Slay me, destroy the wretched armor I wear, and flee far away, that the queen may never find and tame you for her own. Do it!" Satsuki barked, coughing on blood. Her eyes were as steel. The princess stood straighter despite her weathered appearance, projecting the strength that had inspired her soldiers and inspired the Circle time and again. Her aura flared up in response to her will, its beastly form beginning to restore. "Find your resolve! You must!"

Satsuki blinked as a hand folded around hers, its touch warm to her sickly cold skin. Her aura settled, and she turned her head to see the thief studying her.

"For some reason…" Ryuuko said, "I don't think you're someone who could be beaten here. And your words, your will… They don't feel like those of the monster you're supposed to be."

Satsuki was confused only briefly, but a calm settled over her. She grasped Ryuu's hand in return, and felt the other woman's strength, and so much more, as a bond spun open between them.

Why… does this person feel so close? Like an old friend…

Now was not the time to wonder.

"You're ready to die today, Kiryuuin Satsuki?" Ryuuko scoffed. "You don't have the right to say that in such a noble tone. You've taken too many lives in the name of your 'ambition' to die without answering for them."

Ryuu had turned her attention forward, toward the opposing dragon of light.

"Leave this place," Ryuuko whispered, cold.

Junketsu faltered, flinching as if struck. "*What…?!* "

"You heard me," Ryuuko growled, raising her voice. "I bested your Godplate's power, didn't I? I, Matoi Ryuuko, command you to leave! Release the princess, and begone from here!"

Junketsu stepped back, shaking his head. Satsuki was baffled as she watched. Somehow… somehow, the dragon she'd been unable to tame alone was now…?

No - the *how* of it mattered not. What mattered was what could be done.

"Ryuuko!" she said, stretching her hand forward.

When their fingers intertwined before them, a blade of light formed in their grasp.

Ryuu nodded. "Do it!"

Holy light sprang forward like a wave, engulfing the shrieking invader where he stood. *"This cannot… be… !"*

"Junketsu!" Satsuki cried, as rays of light stretched from her, and power raced between them. "Ancient one, reborn in plate - by the right of my blood, I take hold of your soul, and claim you as my own!"

The frenzy in Junketsu's eyes calmed; the tension left his form. The beast of raging light faded, leaving in its place a dragon of silver-white scales and blue in mane. Ragyou's hold on him was vanquished.

The spirit of the ancient dragon marveled knowingly at the two women a moment longer. Then, eyes gliding shut, he furled his wings at his sides and bowed his head in acknowledgment. "*Satsuki-hime…* "

I won't do wrong by you, Satsuki promised. She understood it firsthand - the pain that bending his will had wrought.

A voice stirred within her as the dragon's form vanished, and the dreamscape faded to white.

'Fierce Junpakko… I thank thee.'

Satsuki gasped as she returned to herself, locking eyes with the woman above her.

Ryuu blinked, watching the orange markings on the princess's face fade away. In a few moments, the Godplate Junketsu shrank to its dormant form.

"You're back, then?" Ryuu said, rising from her after an uncertain pause, though she kept the Bakuzan in hand. Once the thief had retreated a cautious few steps, Satsuki began to rise.

"Ryuuko… You saved me. Of all the people…"

"I guess I did," Ryuu said. "I just hope you won't have me regret it."

Satsuki looked at her hand, remembering the feel of Ryuuko's warm soul as they'd come together. "Have you found a purpose, then? Will you take up arms in service of the rebellion?"

Ryuu squared her shoulders instinctively, a furrow in her brow; Satsuki wondered if she would have propped her free hand on her hip, if not for the shattered shoulder. The rogue's combative posture seemed natural to her frame, and so remained nonetheless confident - a feat, given her state of undress. "If I will… That puts me pretty sarden high on your list of enemies, now doesn't it?"

Satsuki shook her head. "I have far more dangerous enemies to overcome, and they reside not in the insurgency's ranks." She cringed. "You understand, do you not? When I took your hand… you saw all I so desperately concealed."

The halfling studied her carefully. "… That was real. You're trying to convince me that's what your game is? To *overthrow* the… Your *own*… To…?" She clenched her teeth, finding herself grasping for words. Her stance had relaxed, but her fist was closed tightly around the Bakuzan's hilt at her side, the knuckles white. She shook her head, scornful. "Your way of going about it is ruddy *awful* . But…"

"But?"

"All I saw, and I… I didn't see in you any desire for the throne. There's none…"

Satsuki pressed a hand to her heart. "I shall answer someday for my crimes," she said firmly, letting the weight of her intentions sink in. "But at present, there remains yet much to be done. You've my gratitude for your deeds today; thanks to you, my fight will continue."

"And do you still seek to make me a pawn in that fight? No atrocity too great, for the 'greater good' you're chasing after?"

"After beholding the pitiful state of Junketsu, you must understand why I sought so desperately to claim you. There are far worse masters than myself," she pointed out, "for you to be sworn to obey. My offer stands," Satsuki said, sincere. Now an offer, for she could not quite bring herself to demand. "Form a pact with me willingly, and you will be impervious to any such attempts of the queen's."

"And *you* have to understand," Ryuu countered evenly, "that I'm not willing to *belong* to anyone, no matter how upstanding their goals. You want to protect me from the queen? Then protect me with your and Junketsu's strength. You stay in line, and work with the resistance. Do that, and I'll lend you my strength in return… and we can watch *each other's* backs, as equals."

Ryuu planted Bakuzan in the earth and held out her hand, serious.

"Take 'em or leave 'em - those are my terms."

Satsuki considered the woman who'd saved her. A lowly thief… yet kind in heart, strong in her sense of justice. She could not see eye to eye with the princess - would not unconditionally accept and mold herself to Satsuki's will, as did the Circle. Just as well; Ryuu had earned that right. A remarkable halfling, for certain. If their roles had been reversed, would Satsuki have thought to spare her nemesis, to attempt to save her despite the risks? The answer was simple, making the line of thought a bleak one.

The princess had seen through Junketsu's eyes the agony of a forceful taming. Perhaps… perhaps taming this unruly spirit would have proved an inferior way to go about her mission. She needed not to secure her, if she could protect her.

"You must be defeated in battle to be unwillfully tamed," Satsuki said at last. She took a breath, eyes shut a moment. "Fine, then. Let us join forces, that we shall suffer no defeat."

Their hands met, and firmly held.

On the same side, this time…

Who knows what we might accomplish?

Satsuki nodded toward the blade at their side.

"This is what brought our paths together in the first place, wasn't it? A sacred weapon that will never dull, chip, or break, and that has grown synonymous with the might of the Junpakko. It is yours now, Ryuuko. I shall entrust it to you as a token of good will, and to mark your victory today."

Satsuki offered the zweihander's sheath; Ryuu picked up the sword, stowed it, and pushed it back into Satsuki's hands, earning from the princess a questioning look.

"No need," she explained with a wry, crooked grin. "I'm cursed to be incompetent with swords."

Satsuki's brow quirked, but she accepted the blade without offense. "Very well, then."

"Satsuki-hime!"

The two looked in the direction of the shout; upon sighting its source, something sorrowful may have sparked in the princess's eyes. Gamagoori had Iori and the others of the Circle piled on his shoulders as he made toward them, coming around a heap of rubble near the front of the castle. He walked quickly, though pain - and guilt even greater than that which his princess displayed - were clear on his face.

"Look at that," Ryuu muttered, relieved to see she hadn't trapped her 'clients' in rubble. Moreover, she would have wagered the fact that none of the Circle Jerks seemed to be dying meant that throughout her Corruption, Satsuki had never lost herself entirely. Some piece of her had softened her blows on her loyal companions, restraint that may have saved their lives. In the Kiryuuin's position, she wondered if many people could have done the same. Would Ryuu have been able to resist the spell of Corruption? She shook her head at the thought. *What an unbelievable person…*

"Are you well, Satsuki-hime?!" Gamagoori asked, footfalls thudding on the flame-spattered yard as he reached them.

The princess nodded, projecting confidence despite her battered appearance. "I am fine. Worry about yourselves."

"Incredible… Ryuu, you succeeded?!" He bowed his head, teeth clenched. "You've returned Satsuki-hime to us. We are in your debt… !"

Ryuu scratched her head, looking away from the giant and muttering something nonchalant. She was spared the need to formulate an answer when Mikisugi came jogging up, throwing his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Ryuu. And I'm proud, so proud…"

"S-sensei?" she asked, surprised. His voice was tight. The times she'd seen the suave, top-hat wearing master thief overcome with emotion were few and far between. She clapped her good hand on his back. "It's okay, whatever it is. It worked out okay, right?"

He stepped back, hands on her shoulders and relief, and moisture, in his eyes. "Yeah. You did wonderfully." He stripped of his outer coat, whisking it around his pupil's bare shoulders before hugging her again.

"You worry too much, Mr. Mikisugi!" Mako said beside them, grinning without a care in the world. "I knew Ryuu-chan would be totally fine!"

"Mako?" Ryuu asked, turning to her with a start. "How long have you been here…?"

"I was hanging around to keep an eye out for you, but nothing outta' the ordinary came up!" she chirped, drawing a suspicious look from the Sensei.

In the midst of gesticulating animatedly at Ryuu, she flashed something in her palm, for the Sensei's eyes alone - a one-of-a-kind, prototype cartridge for his pistol. His hand twitched unconsciously toward the back of his belt, where he'd thought it secure in a pouch. His jaw parted mutely as the Darkstrider snapped her hand shut, destroying it in a sparking pop of smoke.

Ryuu had conveniently failed to glimpse it, in the course of the Darkstrider's gesturing and rambling and sleight of hand. "Eh?" She let out a baffled sound, looking from Mako's smiling face to her smoking hand and back again. She took a glance at the wordless Sensei, who had turned suddenly pale; his gaze hung blankly on Mako's cheerful grin. "What was that?" Ryuu asked, as the smoke hung in the air. "Actually, what happened to your hair, Mako? And your shoulder?" she asked, seeing bandages.

"Hmm, this? What a mystery!" Mako sang, before rattling off about the humidity this week and how all the fires Ryuu had started would at least help with that, and- "EEEEK, Ryuu-chan!! Don't breathe the smoke!" she shrieked abruptly, tackling the bewildered halfling to the ground. Ryuuko landed with a high-pitched, garbled sound of pain, hand twitching near her wounded shoulder, and Mako split her attention between apologizing profusely and fanning away the fizzled drakefell extract's smoke with her hands.

"How are the others?" Satsuki was asking Gamagoori, tense.

"They'll live," he assured her, hastening as he spoke. "Inumuta's the worst off, but the last he heard from his critters is what he's worried about. By now the queen's party can't be far from the city - they're bound to enter the gates any minute!"

Satsuki swore. "We need to be gone before that happens; there's no hiding in plain sight any longer. But with the state you're in…"

Ryuuko, rising with Mako from the ground nearby, was considering the tall Enforcer and the four he carried; her gaze flickered to Mikisugi, to the princess, and back to the Chief of Enforcers again.

"If you can part with that heavy armor of yours," Ryuu said, "I reckon it'll be doable."

"My armor…?" Gamagoori inquired, while the princess's eyes grew.

The thief only smirked.

I didn't want to admit it - that I could be fighting 'for the kingdom,' for countless people I don't even know. That I could fight so rebels aren't butchered and towns aren't purged; that I could fight for a future where we don't have to watch prisoners being tortured to death in the Square.

Heavy wingbeats shook the night air as they sluggishly lifted off and rose. The sharp pupils and red irises within glistening golden eyes swept over the scene below - over a castle face in shambles, a ruined ballroom open to the elements beneath its collapsed ceiling, and a grand courtyard peppered with crevices and cracks, large swathes of grasses and prim hedge sculptures brilliantly aflame.

If I could just fight for myself, it didn't seem so crazy. It would all come down to one fugitive, one monster's self-defense.

But if I'm fighting for more than that… if I commit to fighting for a human cause…

She looked back. The princess, seated foremost among the others huddled on her back, gave a cool, slow nod. That woman was prepared to plunge into chaos, to fight overwhelming odds; her fearsome resolve wouldn't have her waver for one moment.

"Do it," Satsuki urged. Ryuu flashed her fangs and looked down again.

There was no question in Kiryuuin Satsuki's mind, no fear of change, no possibility of defeat. She looked dispassionately upon the only home she'd ever known. Jaw stern, cold fury in blue eyes sparkling against the flames below - such was the look of the princess, this night on which she became an exile.

The dragon inhaled, chest swelling with air, and led with her head as she angled her wings to sweep forward and down. Energy shimmered over her scales.

If I commit to a human cause, then I guess, unquestionably… that's no longer mere self-defense, but defiance.

Treason, against the most powerful empire the world has ever known.

A valorous roar, and Ryuu unleashed a streaming jet of spraying flame down upon the frontmost regions of the evacuated castle as they swooped overhead.

She rose again, above the spectacular blaze and crumbling spires, and spread her wings as she sent a spectacular blast of flame billowing and curling into the air above, for all the nobles, mages, and Enforcers in the surrounding area to see. Then she flew forward, high over the city but below the clouds, roaring fearlessly as she went.

"This is no coward's flight," Satsuki said, watching as the city's outer wall passed below them. She spotted a force on the road to the capital's gates, dotted with countless magelight lanterns. Somewhere in that darkness, among the antlike procession, was the one Satsuki was sworn to overthrow. Her hands tightened slightly in Ryuu's mane. "This night marks our first victory, and our declaration of war."

Ryuu snorted in answer.

For the second time, the princess was stolen away from the castle, and the city, by the ferocious ryuu.

So they flew, soaring through the clouds until the capital lay far behind.

The ashfall swept over Upper City like light snow, sooty grey flakes swirling lazily about on currents of baking air that stank of brimstone.

Firefighting squads were scrambling to contain the blaze as the queen, who had ordered her driver forward despite a prattling show of concern from some attendants, stepped from her carriage at the edge of the burning courtyard. A loose perimeter had been set up by a handful of Enforcers. The horses that had pulled her car snuffled nervously at the smoky air, round, black eyes reflecting the dancing flames.

"My queen!" The Enforcer who had stopped the carriage driver had been dumbstruck for a few moments as she walked toward the castle. She looked back at him when he called out, raising a brow with a silent, dangerous hint of a smirk. He gathered his wits, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty, it is unsafe to proceed…"

"Is that all?"

"U-um - yes, ma'am?"

She turned away, strolling on through the courtyard on a course for the castle. The man watched her walk between patches of flame, and prepared to follow her when a hand gripped his shoulder.

The queen's favored attendant gave him a sidelong look over the rims of her glasses, straight-backed and calm.

"Do you question her?"

He blanched at the woman's question. "Never…"

She released his shoulder and followed the queen. "Delay her no longer," she said, offering one callous backwards look before she hastened again to the monarch's side.

Hououmaru Rei shadowed the queen's unhurried trek to the castle, to a path that brought them to a stairway down. The queen had only smiled steadily, even when flames raged so close Hououmaru felt the heat might blister.

As the queen navigated the paths deeper into the castle's underbelly, she was absolutely glowing. Hououmaru shivered as the sweat that had covered her outside in the courtyard was chilled in the musty air and shifting drafts. The queen's expression didn't seem to fit the discomfort of the conditions, the state of her castle, or the offhand announcement she made.

"Satsuki has tamed Junketsu. His bond to me is no more."

Hououmaru's expression only briefly gave to surprise. "Impossible."

"She had *help* ."

Something dawned on the usually stoic attendant in a few moments, this time truly widening her eyes. Her voice was a whisper. "Gods above…"

Ragyou's serpentine smile never ceased. If anything, it had stretched itself wider, spanning her face to a degree that bordered on unnatural.

In the Bloodforge they found the High Sorceress in a wretched state - sprawled on the floor, hands clutched loosely around a braided cord woven with Replenishing arcana. Her breath whistled, and she shook feebly in her slumber. Ragyou clicked her tongue, in pity or distaste.

Hououmaru cleared off a nearby work table and lifted Nui's charred form, depositing her on the surface. Ragyou's look was unconcerned, almost detached as she reached smoothly out to slice her own palm on a rugged edge of the stone table. She raised and clenched her hand, letting her blood fall between the blond priestess's parted lips.

"What a fortunate mother I am…" Ragyou hummed. "The scheming cub brings no end of entertainment. Satsuki will humor me our games, for just a bit longer… And the darling *Ryuuko*…"

She trailed off as Nui shuddered on the table, wheezing for a few moments, scraping her fingers against the stone, and relaxing again. Color returned to her skin, though her eyes remained dull. Ragyou shushed, pressing her hand wetly against the priestess's lips to let her drunkenly nurse the wound. A rumble sounded from somewhere in the burning castle above.

Queen Ragyou sighed, shaking her head. Hououmaru remained deferentially silent, but saw the fervent glint in the monarch's

carmine eyes.

"You spurn the mother's love, and beckon her wrath… Then by the gods, dear Satsuki, you shall receive it."

By a brook high in the rugged hills of a remote, forested region, the party took stock of its injured. The now-human Ryuu had been quiet for some time after their landing, perhaps tired from the battle and flight, perhaps mulling the gravity of the situation.

Senketsu lazed at Ryuu's side, his head in her lap.

A few muttered words about a 'meeting spot' were all Satsuki had been able to gather. The canine seemed to have been waiting nearby, to come bounding up, barking excitedly, when Ryuu and her passengers had touched down; he had bumped noses with the several-ton winged beast, wagging his tail energetically as if he saw no difference between her human and dragon forms. Giving him a gentle nuzzle, Ryuu had held her form groggily until the riders clambered from her back, and then shifted to collapse in a hug against the utterly giddy hound. Satsuki had heard with no small bit of confusion Ryuu's mumbling - about him being a good fellow for finding his way there - but questioned no further for the time being. Ryuu's fingers were nestled in his shaggy fur, occasionally scratching, and he lay with his eye peacefully shut, as if all were right in the world. If only, Satsuki thought. She almost envied that look.

The princess, not keen on wearing Junketsu just now, somehow held a regal bearing even while sitting on a log in a hodgepodge of loose garments aggregated from what the others could spare - Sanageyama's undershirt, Inumuta's outer robe, and Mikisugi's slacks rolled up to the ankles, as the sensei retained a pair of tights for himself. Naturally, Satsuki had not been the one to request aught from them; the thoughtful suggestion had been Nonon's, and the others were more than happy to relieve her of wearing the armor that had nearly gotten them all killed. Still, she kept the newly-tamed

armor and its accompanying robes in a neat bundle at her side, making a conscious effort not to begrudge Junketsu.

Ryuu faded between gazing into space and idly observing the others, balancing a burned-out slouch with anxiety seemingly too great to let her shut her eyes; so after pacing and taking a drink from the stream twenty minutes ago, she had settled down with Senketsu's reassuring presence on her lap and hadn't budged since. The party still shuffled sleepily about the activity of checking wounds; incredibly, Ryuu for her superhuman vitality, and Satsuki for having been protected by Junketsu, were among the least-critical combatants. Ryuu's arm hung unhappily in a sling, and her bruised ribs had been bandaged, further inspection voluntarily deferred for until after Iori and Mikisugi were done with the Circle.

The young thief wouldn't admit it, but she still wondered at the princess; from the first strike she'd taken from the Godplate's wearer, she had understood that Satsuki could very well kill most humans in a single blow. Yet consciously or not, the princess had refrained from attacking the Circle with deadly force. Houka was in worst condition, more from self-inflicted damage from his gambit than from Satsuki's attacks. He was presently unable to move much at all from the backlash of excessive channeling, but Iori predicted little if any permanent harm; within a week he ought to be able to walk, and in a few more, to begin weaving magic again.

"What ails you?"

Ryuu looked up at the Kiryuuin's voice with a muted start, then back to the others. She considered diverting the royal's question with snark or playing dumb, but knew she must have looked a mess, if the jumbled state of her thoughts was letting on. She didn't have the energy to care about keeping her guard up, just now.

"This happened," Ryuu said finally, scolding herself for how weakly it came out. "I mean… we did that. We escaped, and we lit up the godsdamned castle, and here we all are."

"On a mountain in the middle of nowhere."

"Alive. Sizing up the thousand-year dynasty, like a bunch of fools. It's a lot to take in."

"Fools, or dreamers?" Satsuki said, a hint of a smile on her lips.

"That sounds funny, coming from you," Ryuu pointed out.

Satsuki sighed, and did not deny it. "What I have forgotten of 'dreams,' I've more than recovered in ambition. I cannot pretend to know what you're feeling; I've been a revolutionary for as long as I can remember. Ever since my father…" She trailed off in a soft yawn, a hand politely hiding her mouth, and brushed aside Ryuu's curious look in a moment. "Forget it. The only matter of import is the path on which we now stand. You *are* committed to seeing this through to the end, correct?"

Ryuu snorted. Even fatigued and drowsy, the princess didn't waver in her intensity. "Who do you think I am, Kiryuuin? I'll see it through, sure as you will. Don't you worry yourself about that… *What?* " Ryuu asked, frowning in annoyance as Satsuki laughed.

"Nothing," Satsuki said, and her soft smile was genuine when she met the eyes of the woman beside her. "It pleases me to hear that, Dragon Thief."

Ryuu straightened, mouth working a second as she tried to give a snappy comeback - and then realized she rather *liked* the sound of the unsolicited nickname. Face warming, she turned her head away; Senketsu raised his head, and she stood abruptly a moment later.

"We're gonna win, huh?" she asked, head low. "We're gonna search out the path the victory wherever it exists, and we're gonna rock this kingdom to its core."

"Yes," Satsuki said. "That is my ambition, and that is what I believe. It is all I *can* believe. And with everyone here, and everyone who will

dare to raise arms in the name of revolution… the path to victory *will* reveal itself, so long as we pursue it."

Ryuu didn't look at her, but walked away when Satsuki finished speaking. The Kiryuuin quirked a brow; nearby, Mikisugi and then the others took notice as Ryuu walked out to a ledge overlooking the forested valley, facing the dawn sun.

She was silent for several moments, hair swaying in the breeze. Then she leaned far back, drawing in as much breath as she could, and lurched forward to unleash a roar.

The sound was long, powerful, and proud - not so mighty as it would have been in her draconic form, but fiercer than any human shout. It was in one a challenge and a declaration of triumph, bursting with cathartic emotion as it resounded across the valley and hills.

It was a sound of freedom, and her resolve to hold that freedom in her hands and defend it to the last.

Satsuki's hand on Junketsu tensed. Her brow knitted for a moment, and she bowed her head, humble. *May you never be tamed, Matoi Ryuuko…*

Senketsu had bounded to Ryuu's side. Shortly into a second yell, the dog joined with a bellowing howl, as if invigorated by Ryuu's display. Mikisugi chuckled as he watched; Mako sat with a bubbly grin on a jutting stone in the hillside, listening appreciatively to their hearts' song.

A half-dragon who bears a powerful name, and was able to help me tame Junketsu… and at her side, a master thief, a Darkstrider, and a hound who seems entirely too clever. As Satsuki looked on, she had a feeling that she'd only just begun to uncover the secrets surrounding the enigmatic Ryuu.

Sanageyama's lips curled upward grudgingly where he lay near their campfire. Nonon looked on in contemplation, and Gamagoori

observed with a respectful air, his face as stone. The sickly Inumuta shut his eyes, leaning somewhat on Iori beside him.

"We pulled through this time," the summoner muttered, "Somehow."

"The reason's standing right there," Gamagoori said, not shifting his stone gaze for so much as a moment. "Give credit where credit's due."

"Feels bloody awful to admit it though, right?" Sanageyama said. "Without little miss Ryuu, we'd have been royally *screwed* . As if one woman I could never defeat wasn't enough… We must grow stronger, if the name 'Circle of Elites' shall carry any weight." He became thoughtful. "For Satsuki-hime…"

"We'll get stronger," Nonon muttered, smiling in spite of herself. "So next time, she won't have to rely on *that* beastly dolt to protect her."

A ways from them, Mikisugi shook his head in wonderment, a smirk on his lips. They'd survived, Ryuu was untamed, and they'd uncovered perhaps the unlikeliest of allies to the rebellion's cause. "Not a bad night's work," he remarked, watching the halfling and the mutt. "You've done well, Ryuuko."

And now, I suppose… the hard part begins.

The queen tilted back her head and smoothly inhaled, offering a dazzling smile as she basked in the afternoon sun and the roaring applause and cheers of her noblesse citizens below.

She departed the balcony from which she'd delivered the speech, returning to the castle's interior. Her formal declaration of war on the rebellion was an event of entertainment to the noblesse; how simple it was to instill in them that life was a game to be enjoyed, and the spilt blood of their lessers, a thing of amusement.

"How the masses do love their games," she remarked, shaking her head as she strode through tall-windowed halls bathed in the sun's golden glow, white dress sweeping about her heels. Rows of servants bowed at the tall, slender monarch's passing, heads low in reverence.

The low-blooded were like children, and the noblesse, descended from the bloodlines of mages who had sworn fealty to the Radiant Dynasty centuries ago, small and rambunctious beasts who adored and obeyed her like a guardian who spoiled them rotten on their taste for blood. The most powerful aristocrats and mages in the kingdom, so easily sated by speeches and thrilling diversions. They too were like children, yet drenched to the bone in delectable sin.

The queen descended into the castle's depths, down winding stairways dotted with bluish magelights and mossy steps, down a pathway that stretched above the gurgling Hakuryou within hollowed caverns. And near the place where she might have continued on to the Bloodforge where her High Sorceress slumbered, she broke off on a different, well-worn and ancient path, to a door locked both by a heavy key and by a magic that answered to the reigning queen alone.

The room was dark, damp and cool. The sound of running water still faintly tickled her ears, but was overshadowed by the rumble of slow, steady, rhythmically shifting drafts.

Breath.

And if one were attuned to vibrations, they would feel upon the ground, even from beyond the door, the lethargic palpitations of a drumming heart. One, every minute or so. Beautiful. It was steadier than it once had been.

"The Song of Sealing…" Ragyou drawled, hand brushing delicately over a surface patterned in rough, sturdy and gnarled scales. Once, she had brought her *ryuuteki* for every visit - each time, arriving with the intent to play the flute. Each time, departing with a promise to

play it the next. She had stopped bothering with such lies long ago. It was simply enchanting, to witness the changes that unfurled.

"If it's all in good fun… is neglecting it really such a crime?"

She was enlightened; she understood matters few could comprehend. She understood the immensity of what slumbered in this chamber. It was why she now knew that *preventing* the revival of something so divine would truly be criminal.

"He whose breath swallows the battlefields… whose fangs rend even the piteous gods…"

The lids rolled to part languidly from the curved surface of a vast, translucent membrane, which then slid out to reveal a dull but glistening golden eye larger than the queen was tall.

"Ancient King… dearest *Kouketsu*… the era of your rebirth is at hand. This world will be your kingdom, and its people, the banquet to sate your bottomless hunger."

A long, low rumble filled the cavern. The queen shivered in wicked exhilaration.

Project RYUU

~ ~

Fire and Ice

End

END OF PART I

Early Days

Chapter 17: Early Days

Thanks again to those of you commenting! It's no exaggeration to say it makes my day to hear what you think ^^

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Seventeen \ Early Days

Autumn.

Heaps of newly fallen leaves scatter from the straw sandals of a frolicsome girl of three, who barrels and kicks through the golden-brown forest with abandon. She never stops moving as she gathers small armfuls of leaves to toss into the air, leaping, slipping, scrambling down, and pushing up again, gleeful peals of laughter ringing out all the while. Her heart is soaring with each leap, buoyed on tides of mirth that swirl and sweep like the leaves that scamper in the breeze.

These are her idyllic days.

She takes a tumble through a mound of fallen foliage higher than her knees, going down in a clumsy flailing of short limbs. She rolls over in the cool leaves, eyes shut above her smile as she catches her breath, stretching out her arms and feeling the morning sun's glow on her face.

Sitting up, she looks back up the path of their morning hike - the path she follows liberally, but knows never to stray too far from.

The path is empty.

"*Tou-chan?* "

She clambers to her feet, pausing. Taking a few stunted steps - more thinking than moving. How did she lose him? Lip wrinkling, she calls out.

A shape launches from behind a tree she begins to pass, grabbing her with a grizzled, soft but sudden roar. The ambusher's cry is filled with humor, a playful sound not meant to pose a remotely believable impression of any pouncing beast - but it still elicits from the girl a squeal of surprise. The scare is short-lived, and surprise blends into more pealing of delight as he slings her gently onto his shoulder beside a mane of gray, patting her on the back and joining in her laughter.

"Caught you, Ryuuko," he chortles, eye crinkled shut. The tot bunches a bit of the *haori* coat over his robe in tiny fists, kicking lightly at his chest as he continues to walk.

"No fair! You sneaked up!" The complaint comes out lighthearted despite her best efforts to pout. The child's laughter is not so easily defeated.

"Hrm…" The thoughtful sound is gravelly on his throat. He reaches back along her wriggling form, hand finding the crown of her skull - and the pair of horns poking through her dark mop. "Ryuuko…" he says, a bit more serious. "You can't let them out every time you're surprised."

"Why *not?* " she whines. Frustrated, she squeezes her eyes shut and concentrates, and in a moment her horns have vanished.

"It will be helpful, in the future, to have better control over the little things."

"In the future when? Why?"

"Around other people…" He pauses, stroking his beard and looking up at the sunlit trees. "Other people might be quite startled, you see. They oft take to dislike, or fear, when someone is different from them."

She wriggles until he lowers her again; he lets her break from his hold when she is near enough the ground to scamper off as she lands. "There *aren't* other people here, though. There's just Tou-chan and me!"

"Mikisugi-san and that whippersnapper of his came by the summer before last. Perhaps you were too small to remember…"

"If they're Tou-chan's friends, they're okay, right? If bad people come, I'll just scare them off!" She turns, raising her hands above her head with the fingers curled like claws. Giggling, she turns and races off again, kicking off her sandals. She pulls her dress over her head, somehow managing to cast it away without falling again.

The father shakes his head. "Ryuuko," he says, not loud enough for her to hear. "It's the bad ones who need *most* not to see…"

She topples - and a small dragon butts her head forward in a leap, tossing leaves in her horns and rearing up, wings batting at the air to throw short gusts. Her most ferocious roar is a chirping, warbling squeak, and she spins and bats her tail at the plant litter before swinging her claws around and leaping onward.

She finds a particularly large leaf pile by a ridge and dives into it, swallowed whole - bursting free with a hop and a thrust of her wings before sinking in again, chirruping with glee. She pokes her head out, ruby eyes sizing up her father on the approach as she wiggles in excitement.

The man has gathered up her discarded dress and sandals, and wanders off the path with his best show of befuddlement. His eye considers numerous leaf piles, and he leans to peek behind a random tree. "Now where did that rascal of mine get off to?"

The small ryuu bursts from the hiding place with her childlike roar, and the man jumps, letting her repay him for startling her before. He knows her expressions and body language in either form well enough to discern the playfulness on a reptilian face before she shifts again. Standing, she gestures a hand boastfully toward the mound of golden leaves she emerged from.

"This is my treasure!" she declares grandly. "None can pass!"

"None?" The old man cackles. "But I, the dark warlock of Abyssal Swamp, lord of countless legions of evil, have set my sights on this hoard! I'll use this treasure to fuel the most nefarious of deeds-!"

"The warlock, *again* ?" the child whines.

"O-oh?" the man says, scratching his chin.

She shakes her head left and right, fussy as she stomps her foot. "A new one!"

"How about… hm. A knight, perhaps?" He snaps his fingers. "A *magical* knight!"

She nods approvingly, arms crossed.

"Alright then…" He straightens up his popping back, as much as he is able. "I, magical knight and champion of the queen, have searched far and wide for your lair! For glory and riches, for Crown and kingdom, I challenge the one who dwells here to battle!"

Ryuuko runs forward and leaps as he holds out his arms - but the girl shifts, meeting him as a dragon a few times larger than her human self. He catches her with a surprised 'oof,' but staggers and recovers

in time to take a controlled, dramatic topple onto his back, bemoaning his defeat. Laughter rumbles from his chest as she nuzzles and bumps her head affectionately against him.

"Ryuuko," he chuckles, ruffling the beginning tufts of a mane between her horns. "You're getting a bit too big for this. I won't be able to lift you up in this shape, soon - Ah, and mind your horns, would you?" His smile crinkles the corner of his eye. "You're growing so big and strong, aren't you?"

She changes back, and she lets him set her on her feet and coax the dress back over her head, her arms through the sleeves. Her face is curious as she looks up at him, quiet in thought. "Tou-chan?"

"What is it?"

"Why don't *you* ever make the change? Do you know how?" It sounds funny saying it, because when she thinks about it she's not sure *she* even knows how to do the change - she just *does* it, same as moving her feet or breathing in. Her horns pop out before she knows it when she's startled, and if she falls more than a little far at all, she feels a pull that wants to be in the shape that has wings.

"Make the change…?" The old man throws back his head in laughter, much to her confusion. He ruffles her short hair, catching his breath to answer.

"Ryuuko… Most people can't change shapes. They grow from children to adults, but morphing freely between two forms… Very few can do such a thing."

"Huh?" Her expression is blank, dumbfounded. Then her brow furrows, in the tiniest way. "Stop joking, Tou-chan!"

"I'm not joking, Ryuuko. I never thought to point out-,"

"I'm *weird?!* "

"No! *No*," he shushes, crouching to her level on seeing her eyes moistening, trepidation shaking her lip. "Sweetie, no. You're special," he assures her, "not 'weird.' Your power isn't common, but it's a wondrous gift." He holds her hands, rubbing delicate palms with his thumbs.

"But I'm getting too big," she whimpers, voice small and unclear. Her head is low, chin resting on her chest. "Will I get bigger than Tou-chan?"

"In your other shape? Why, definitely. Rather soon, at that."

"That's *weird*," she insists.

"Well, I don't think so. Do you know why?"

Her inquisitive sound becomes a squeal as he lifts her under the arms, standing and tossing her gently up. It is a dragon that falls back into his arms, trilling with delight, as he catches her with a grunt of effort and holds her close.

She wriggles with joy, shutting her eyes but minding her horns and her claws as she nuzzles him again. This peace, these woods and these hikes, her life and her home here with her father - these are her treasures.

"The answer is this…" He pats her back. "No matter how big and strong you get, you'll always be my little princess… my darling Ryuuko."

Only the naïve think perfect days can stretch on forever. As she grows older, the time he has for her lessens.

He doesn't need to watch her so closely, as she's some months over the age of four. Their morning hikes, the time when he used to coddle her and smile fondly as she played, have simplified, grown more driven and clear-cut. No longer play, but exercise, a checkbox

in a routine. He checks his traps and rotates out more, and they usually have meat. He spends so much time in sullen thought, serious, his words short.

About once a month, there are examinations. He measures her height and weight, and then her *weight*, and her height at the shoulder, and the length from her nose to tail, the span of her wings, the lengths of her canine teeth and her claws. He winds the tape measure around a foreleg and then a hind leg and her chest and her neck and her snout, methodical, muttering to himself and jotting down the results in a messy journal. He sketches her in her nonhuman shape, annotating his observations.

She cooperates, happy for what attention it amounts to. When she asked what it's all for, he said the tests aren't all that important, but it's second nature for him to take the opportunity to record good data. She remembers that she is 'unusual,' in being able to change. She starts to wonder how much so, just how unusual she is.

When she acts out, he scolds her. If she acts out more, it's a solemn but stern 'not now,' if she isn't just ignored. He sounds so tired, she can only leave him be.

The old man spends hours and hours each day in the basement, down the stairs where she isn't allowed to go. She builds with blocks, thumbs through old books she wishes she could read, but settles for making up stories from their pictures. She colors with the nice pastels and paper he brought back from the city one day. She plays in the yard or pokes at bugs or climbs on the roof and kicks back alone on the warm tiles, bathing in the sun and watching the clouds crawl by. Or for hours at a time, alone in her room, she practices what little she knows how to play on her *biwa* . She smiles while she daydreams about playing his song so well that he'll be impressed, and he'll praise her, and he'll have to teach her more.

He emerges for meals. She wants to talk, but usually can't think of what to say to start. She could ask him to read her books, like he used to. She could ask him to listen to her play the lute. She

considers it, but hesitates. She wonders if her playing is good enough yet, to ask for his time. She knows he's busy. He's *always* busy. He must be the busiest person in the world, because she can't imagine anyone being busier. She just wishes he'd say more things. Some days he talks, some he does not.

More months pass, and sometimes he leaves the house and he's gone for days at a time. He leaves food, he reminds her to be safe, he holds her in a lengthy hug and smiles at her before he leaves. She smiles back. She knows he wouldn't go if it wasn't important, just like she knows he wouldn't work all day if it wasn't important.

One such morning of one such week, she wakes up cold.

Her brow furrows in discomfort, and she clambers groggily from her blankets to her cracked-open window, pulling down with her weight to shut it.

She drags her feet from her room, rubbing her eyes, looking around. She's pretty sure she slept late, but the front room and kitchen are as they were the night before. The cottage is dim.

He's been gone for five days.

Her lip trembles, throat tightens.

He's late.

She wants to do something secretly rebellious, like not brushing her teeth like she's supposed to every morning. After a minute of simpering indecision, she ducks her head and trudges to the bathroom, brushes her teeth.

She knows how to make a fire in the hearth, now. She's never allowed to breathe fire in the house, but she figures she might just this once, once she's got the kindling set up, instead of using the tinderbox like she's supposed to. Lighting it with her breath is

simpler. That will be her quiet rebellion, she decides with a grin, and there's something satisfying to the thought.

Before she gets to the hearth, she pulls open the curtains to let in some light - and there's so *much* light that comes flooding in, she blinks in startlement.

Outside, it's white. The sun isn't even strong from all the clouds, but the heavy layer of down that's been piled upon the world, the sparkling white blanket that's still being dusted with fat flakes that spiral lazily down, is bright.

She stares for a moment in wonder. The world has been transformed, and it's unbelievably pretty. She's seen pictures painted in books, but she's never seen real snow piled up like this before. Father said the winters here don't usually get cold enough.

Suddenly giddy, she bolts away from the window, making a beeline for the front door and shoving it wide.

The snow is deep. She leaps from the porch with arms upraised, squealing as the powdered fluff swallows her up to the knees. She scrambles further, picking it up and inspecting it, throwing balls of it as her breath fogs thinly in the air. It's a thrilling break from the monotony. The cold burns her throat and stings her hands, but she's too excited to care.

In a few steps she finds it's gotten hard to walk forward, even though the snow doesn't seem much deeper. Her ears and cheeks kind of hurt. Panting happily, she turns, eyes settling on the house fifteen meters away. She didn't get to play for long at all, but she should head back in. The chill is so much more than it was indoors, and it isn't comfortable against her pajamas and skin.

She breathes out, some part of her looking for the wispy fog of her breath white against the dark backdrop of the cabin's front. But her breath is invisible again.

When she steps, she's down before she realizes when she lost balance. She pushes with her hands, meaning to sit up again, but she only flounders a short few inches and falls flat again, weight pressing on her numb arm beneath her.

"… Huh?"

A feeble note of question, and the first inklings of panic crop up, belatedly, in the back of her skull. She breathes fast and shallow, trying to move. She's heavy. Her body is moving in slow motion, and she can barely feel that it's moving at all.

As quickly as the panic came crashing through, it's being snuffed out, dimming, fading, smothered under a press of slumber. The warmth has been sucked out of her, stolen, gone. She can only relax as her thoughts grow sluggish - a churning river replaced with stiffening tar, then frozen over in the cold.

Blank. It may have been a few moments, or hours.

"*Ryuuko!* "

She barely processes the voice, barely registers being plucked from the snow. Her eyes can't focus anywhere as the scenery changes abruptly, and she's indoors, and there's a thud, the door shut.

She blinks. She's cradled in an arm, close against his chest, and he's yelling at her. He's never sounded so angry, or scared, and it's frightening, every bit as frightening as the moment she realized she couldn't move anymore in the snow.

Soon a fire is nestled in the hearth. The man sits close with the child bundled in his arms, her skin like ice as she shakily leeches his warmth. The look on his face is solemn. He hasn't spoken even once since he stopped yelling.

Lethargy still drags unpleasantly on her body, but it's warming up, and her mind is waking up again with it. And she's sniffling, then

hiccupping and sobbing quietly against her father. Happy he's there. Afraid, because it all happened so fast. Embarrassed for nearly getting hurt. Angry, so angry, for a reason she can't explain.

The man shushes, gently tousling her hair. His warmth seeps into her, soothes and steadies her tiny heart.

The trembling child shuts her eyes, and she knows she's safe.

Crying and yelling, hands balled tight, hot tears staining her face and robe as her feet churn through crisp leaves on the trail.

He's awful, and stupid. He promised, and he forgot.

When it sunk in that he wasn't coming up from the basement, that the sun was getting lower and lower and he wasn't coming out to greet the eagerly waiting child, her throat got tight. She gripped her shoulders, burying her face in the arms of the robe she'd picked out from her closet that morning. A picnic basket sat full and untouched at her side, though her stomach grumbled. She sat for some time, stifling whimpering wheezes of pain, mind racing, alone. Alone, alone.

The pressure building hot behind her eyes. She would rather be all alone than to be promised something and forgotten.

When the floodgate broke, it wasn't with sadness. It was anger.

She screams as she runs on, and her throat burns from screaming so hard. The sun is setting. She's not supposed to be out late, and she doesn't care. She hates him. She swears she's never talking to him again.

This morning she loved him. He patted her on the head and made a promise and she beamed.

Now she wants to yell at him, maybe even wants to hurt him. She keeps running until she hurts.

Down she goes over a gnarled tree root, scraping her hands and knees and sliding in a mess of leaf litter. She realizes she lost the path at some point, with her vision blotted and blurred by a filter of tears. Her head throbs, and she stays there, sobbing, throat raw and teeth clenching hard on the anger she's learned. It's not fair.

She pushes up slightly, heavy with exhaustion. Her head is fuzzy with the aftermath of the feelings set loose, allowed to roil and rock her small form with all their might. Panting, she hears a tree branch creak.

The shifting air that follows is a soundless signal - and it's signal enough for her to burst instinctively into the change, just in time for a mountain lion's fangs to shatter against the scales of her neck.

The dragon falls beneath its crashing weight upon her back, screeching at the bruising strength of its jaws. But the cat is startled by the transformation of the easy meal it had anticipated, stunned by the teeth it cracked with the savage strength of its own bite on her now-armored neck.

She fixes a crimson eye on the predator, furious, and their struggle is shortly decided.

The man is concerned when he emerges from the basement, finding the house empty despite the hour.

He forgot - time got away from him, but he'd made a breakthrough after all this time. The specimen could be completed as he'd hoped.

Thoughts of his designs flee him when he finds the house dark, the main floor vacant since the sun in the still-open windows had lit it earlier in the day. He checks the girl's room, hoping she is perhaps asleep early. His heart plummets at finding her room empty as well.

He calls out, more frantic by the second. The yard, he thinks, hastening for the door. She should be inside at this hour, but if she's playing in the yard - gods, or if she ventured off to the lake alone… !

His mind is flickering over images of her fallen into the lake or lost in the woods as he rushes out onto the porch. Sensing movement, he looks down to the side of the door.

The drake lying on the porch, wings folded at her sides, is about the size of a pony; her form isn't what alarms him. That is achieved by the broken form of a glossy-eyed cougar sprawled before her on the porch, and the quiet crunch of the young beast's fangs in its innards.

The feline is sprawled in a puddle of gore; its hide has been slashed and torn off in patches, messy with its killer's inexperience. Blood and drag marks trail from the woods to where it now rests on the porch, its ribcage busted and torn with great but clumsy strength, its neck in tatters, some of its limbs mauled and crushed as if they were chewed for leisure. But presently, the dragon is fixated upon its open stomach, black-stained snout digging, tearing, snapping up what remains of the spilled contents of its abdominal cavity.

The smell of gore hits the man a moment behind the grisly sight. He has never considered himself faint of heart, but the smoldering rage in the drake's unfocused eyes as she works on her kill chills him to his core.

It's as if she hasn't noticed him. He almost wants to shut the door, to retreat quietly before she does.

For somehow the first time, he thinks of her as dangerous.

He remembers tossing up the squealing newborn babe, catching the happily trilling hatchling as her tiny wings flailed in excitement. Her eyes were bright when she looked at him then.

His panic passes, his head level again. He truly pieces together the scene before him. The mountain lion is bigger than the girl would be

in her human form, and would have been much stronger. The thought of it having found her alone is terrifying.

She is dangerous. He should never have forgotten. But it doesn't change the fact that she is a child.

It takes a few tries for her to answer to her name. She blinks and looks up at him, something monstrous in her eyes, tongue idly flickering across her ensanguined mouth and fangs.

"What happened, Ryuuko?" he tries, at a loss. "Are you unhurt?"

He resists flinching as she makes the shift. The girl's bare form remains streaked with blood that stands out starkly on her pale skin, though she has no visible cuts or lacerations of her own. Sitting up, she gazes cloudily at him, still in a seeming daze. She rubs her neck, and he notices a sizable bruise.

"She jumped on me," she manages, a soft mumble edged with anger. As if she's indignant, but doesn't fully understand it. She shrugs slouched shoulders, but stumbles over her words. "She wasn't hard to defeat."

He steps up and scoops the girl into his arms, holding her close. With a last somber look toward the mountain lion carcass, he carries her inside, heading for the bath.

"Ryuuko… What if you'd been hurt? Or worse?"

She gives a whine, but her anger is forgotten as she buries her face in his chest. She doesn't know what she feels, and she doesn't want to speak.

She doesn't know what she did wrong.

Her fists are balled in her pillow as she stifles broken sobs. She asked if it was about the cat, and he said no. Said it wasn't about her

at all. When he said it, she threw a tantrum, disbelief and panic coiling into anger.

It wasn't about her? How was it not about her, when he wanted to send her off to some far away city?

She had stomped her foot, cried that if bad people try to hurt their life together, she'll chase them away. He gripped her shoulders then, warning sternly that she must not show her other shape to people.

She doesn't care. She wonders what could be happening that should even matter to the two of *them* .

She doesn't love the way things are, but she doesn't want them to change - not like this.

A knock on her door, and she curls stubbornly on her side, pulling her blanket over her head.

"Ryuuko?"

"Go away!"

"Ryuuko… Please, come out? I have something for you."

She hesitates, but eventually trudges to the door. When she opens it, her look is accusatory as she glares sadly up at the old man.

He gives a sigh. "Come along, my girl."

She studies the hand he offers. She relents, stepping with him into the front room.

"I don't understand," she mutters.

"What part is it that isn't making sense?" he asks, with well-tempered patience.

"Why do I have to go? Is it dangerous here?" As she says it, she feels it can't be. This is her safe home, all she knows. If the problem really isn't her, and it isn't Father, it must be from outside. If anyone comes and threatens their life here, she'll tear them up. She wants to grow big and strong quickly, more than she's ever wanted to before, so she can protect their house and their forest and they don't have to worry about anything else.

Her father only shakes his head. Stroking his beard, he considers how he might put it. "The reasons go far beyond the two of us, Ryuuko. What if there's a whole *world* out there that needs help? What if many other people out there are hurting, or will be hurt - people you can't help from here?"

"I don't care about them!"

His look is saddened briefly, causing her to obstinately bite her lip. He grumbles, wearily pensive. "It was a mistake to keep you here, and I'm sorry. You've grown in isolation for so long… I haven't even begun to teach you to *read*…"

"I don't need to read, if I'm here…"

The hope in her voice wrenches something in him. He takes a breath. This is no manner for a young girl to grow up. "Ryuuko…"

He crouches to dab at her tears with his kerchief. He's so close then, giving her his full attention, and she almost wants to fidget under the scrutiny. But the sadness in his eye is deep, no less deep than her own. His smile quirks up the base of his beard.

"I'm so happy, for how strong you are. It means you'll be safe out there."

Her heart falls. She looks away, and she doesn't meet his eyes as he stands again, taking her hand gently in his.

"Come, now. I promised you something, didn't I? This way."

Looking up, she realizes he's starting down the stairwell, looking back for her to follow. The basement, where she's never been allowed before.

Curiosity wins out, and she follows him to the door at the bottom of the stairs.

The basement is dim, lit faintly with magic; even when her eyes adjust from the sunlight that filters in upstairs, and she can see decently well, she wonders at how he can spend all day working down here.

They pass some benches and things she doesn't know the names of, and he leads her to a big metal cabinet that sits on the floor against a wall. It looks solid. She blinks up at the man as he strolls toward it, turning a knob left and right on its door. A click sounds, and he pulls on a sturdy handle to open it up.

Light spills around the door, and gentle heat wafts out of the box with it; a number of lamps shine inside it, all directed toward the thing nestled on a cushion in its center.

"What is that…?" the child asks, as the man reaches in.

He pulls it carefully out - a round, solid thing, larger than his head.

An egg, pale white and speckled with silvery tints of blue.

"The culmination of years of work," he says, holding it out to her. "I'm entrusting it to you."

The egg is warm to the touch; she holds it securely against her body as he guides it into her arms. She senses the importance of it, the work that must have gone into it so far. It weighs several pounds, and its shell seems strong. She peers into its surface, mesmerized by patterns of iridescent color glimmering where the light hits its curved surface.

"Where did it come from?" she asks.

"I created it here."

"No way!"

"Why not?"

"You can't… *make* an egg!" He'd taught her once about birds' eggs in the woods, so she knew. "Something has to lay it!"

"It wasn't easy," he says, humor twinkling in his eye. "It took a good deal of powerful, complex magics to construct it. And it's yours now - a magic egg that will one day come to life."

"What will it hatch into?"

"You'll find out," he assures her. "You protect it until it grows up, and one day, it will protect you in return. It will stay always at your side. Can you do this? I need you to be responsible. Will you watch closely over it?"

She chews her lip, and nods.

When the day of her departure arrives, the girl is quiet the entire way to town. Their last day together shouldn't be like this, but she doesn't know what to say. Anything she could force out to lighten the mood would feel glaringly trivial at this point.

She's quiet even when they reach the village in the hot late afternoon, quiet as she stares in amazement at all the buildings and people. Faces blur together in her eyes. He says it's a small town, and she can't imagine what a big town is like. She almost wants to cling to him as they walk up the street, her head low and her heart shaking and her arms wrapped around her bag. A child-size pack, with a few sets of clothes cradling the large, round egg. He says he'll send her biwa. She hopes he doesn't forget. She wants to remind

him, and doesn't. She worries her fingers in her bag's soft fabric, but keeps as steady a hold on it as ever when it's not safe on her back from its strap.

She sits hunched by some crates and hides her mouth behind the rucksack as he talks to his contact in the caravan. *Caravan* - that had been a brand new word to her the other day when he explained it, and now he was sending her off with one. Traders, performers, their family, and their bodyguards and animals and carts. She glances from the nook she's claimed by some crates, watching someone inspecting a bored donkey's hoof, and others loading up or securing carts. A few teens are chatting by a well, and a woman scolds them to work. Children are helping their parents, cheerful. Huge cloth tents heaped on the ground are being folded and bundled up by neatly accustomed hands, gathered with their spikes and vanishing among cargo. All the caravaners seem to be packing up, almost ready to go. They pack up their whole lives and move like it's nothing. The thought of going away with all these loud strangers makes her heart lurch again.

Her eyes dart back to her father, who's thanking his friend while passing a sack of coin into his hands. He's traded with these people before, selling potions and medicines in this town and requesting supplies and materials from them to look out for on their travels through many regions and trade hubs. The sturdy, jovial man her father is dealing with laughs and says he's always been a good business partner, always paid well. Now her father is trading her, she thinks. A pile of money for them to get her to the capital and get her to the Sensei that lives there, so the hermit doesn't have to deal with her anymore.

The caravan man looks over at her, smiling welcomingly with a wave; his eyes are kind and his jaw is framed by a short brown beard, his hair tucked in a bandana. She flinches and looks quickly away. She holds her bag close, feeling the steady, solid weight of the egg inside it and trying to think about that.

Soon she's seated in one of the carts, her back against a bale of hay. A few other kids nearby eye her curiously before losing interest, playing some game together by clapping their hands and slapping their legs. A teen, the lead man's daughter, she thinks, asks from beside the girl if she's okay, says she's shivering like a mouse. She shakes her head, numb. Her throat is dry as her eyes flicker about. She can't hear; the world seems to fuzz over. Her father is shaking the man's hand one more time, as everyone's getting ready to move.

The old man's eye finds her one last time, and he nods and turns away.

She feels cold. She springs from her reclusive state so suddenly that the girl near her jumps.

"Father!" she screeches, voice cracking in her panic. He's not looking back - he's leaving.

She jumps from the cart as it lurches into motion, escaping the other girl's reaching hands - and runs straight into the strong arms of the caravan man, who scoops her from the ground.

"Father! I want to stay with you!" she wails, tiny voice ringing out as loud as it can muster. "I'll be good! Come back! I want to go home! *Come back!* "

She fights and cries, but her father doesn't look back, doesn't even slow. He must hear her. Why won't he listen? All she can see of him anymore is blurred by tears as he vanishes into the town.

The man who's captured her jogs to catch up to one of the carts, hopping easily onto its back. He starts to curse when she kicks him with a flailing sandal, and bites it back for her sake. His look is sad, but knowing.

"Oi - Ryuu-chan, was it? The Doc said you've got fragile things in your bag you need to take good care of, right?"

She stops her struggling, wondering immediately if she's putting too much weight on the egg in her pack. Sniffling, lip wrinkling, she slouches and holds it close as he lowers her onto the cart beside him, keeping a hold on her hand.

Three rules, above all else. Protect the egg. Don't show your true shape, not even your horns. Don't even let on your physical strength, as you're far stronger than a small child should be.

His words echoed. *'Can you do this for me, Ryuuko? You're a good kid. Remember these things…'*

The girl collapses to plop down in the cart, lightheaded and resigned, and chokes on hushed tears for the rest of the day. She doesn't even know the words to describe the anxiety, the fear, the twist in her heart in the moment he walked away.

She never wanted things to change. She never wanted to let them go, but the halcyon days of her and her father in the forest are over. They're not coming back. That chapter of her life is over, and she has no choice but to come to grips with its end now.

As she tries to mourn the loss, she finds it stale.

It's already been over for a long time.

~ ~

Early Days

[img: https://78.media.tumblr.com/a19245090a156e82542c7d4b6f348d7e/tumblr_p28dwfYke71wbhyabo1_1280.png]

Art by *aryleaves*

End

Thanks go out to **aryleaves** for drawing lovely fanart, and for letting me use it for this chapter! You can check out her tumblr here.

A bit of a change of pace this chapter, but you can consider this the first part of some 'Ryuuko's childhood' backstory. The next flashback chapter of this style won't be until later on, though; next chapter continues where we left off in the present.

Allies Begrudging

Chapter 18: Allies Begrudging

Satsuki grows suspicious toward the peculiar Senketsu; Ryuuko opens up on what little she knows of her lineage.

PART II

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Eighteen \ Allies Begrudging

"What are your thoughts on the hound?"

"I think I oughtn't answer that while he's right here, m'lady Princess - but for the record, he could stand to shed a few pounds."

The summoner directed a weakly irate glower at the green-haired knight above him, face reddening. "I'm lighter than a certain muscle-brained Monkey," he grumbled, the stream of words rendered monotonous with pervasive, lingering exhaustion. Sir Uzu lifted and lowered the man in his arms a few inches, as if to test his weight, and gave an innocent shrug.

"Someone hit him for me," Inumuta groaned. He still couldn't begin to channel arcana without pain; it was taxing even to move his limbs, with the stiffening fatigue that had set in from overloading his magic circuits in the battle of the holiday gala.

Jakuzure seemed to be weighing giving the knight a smack against the fact that doing so would be to humor a request of the summoner; seeing her seem to make up her mind, Sanageyama hopped forward

out or reach just as her hand lashed out. He picked up his pace, edging away from her with a suspicious sneer.

"I can't guarantee I won't 'accidentally' drop someone if even such a dainty hand as Miss Jakuzure's swats at my arm. I'm going sore and stiff from towing around the extra weight."

"You'll know I can weave again when you start tripping over shadows, Sanageyama," the Dark mage warned flatly.

"Settle down, would you?" Gamagoori asked, sending down a disapproving look from where he walked at Sanageyama's side. "Cease your heckling. We've no horse to do the work, and *someone* took one look at the map and supposed it wasn't worth the time to fashion a stretcher. So until we reach town, the man who cannot walk must be carried. If you're already tired, give him back to me."

Having watched quietly, Satsuki shook her head; rather than cut in to clarify her initial question, she had divided her attention between listening to the exchange and stealing glances at the more literal hound that trotted merrily from the woods once more.

Senketsu was uncannily well-behaved - and even compared to the pedigreed dogs of the palace, an uncommonly skillful hunter. Trained hunting dogs were scarcely expected to secure kills or bring in game independent of their human companions, so the princess could only speculate as to how they might perform in comparison. But Ryuu's oversized, shaggy, clumsy-looking dog would wander off and return, scouting the area on his own, occasionally delivering rabbits or squirrels to Mikisugi and Mako as if it were no unusual feat.

Shortly after the group had set out in the morning, the beast had sidled up to the princess with a trot and look that were much too chipper - voicing a bark that seemed somehow not so much like a pet eagerly pestering for attention, but a secondhand impression of behavior she supposed many noblewomen would find in a dog to be cute or endearing. He very much seemed to be addressing her personally; she was evidently the only member of their present

company he had yet to befriend. He had learned which of the humans welcomed hand licks and which did not, and knew he could even get away with washing Sanageyama's face. She had been bewildered to find the hardened warriors and masterful mages of her Circle were in turn on a first-name basis with him, favoring his proper name over such identifiers as 'the hound.'

Keeping pace at the time, Senketsu had shifted to bump her hand with his head and looked up at her again, charming despite his lolling tongue. The princess had awkwardly shooed him away, and the slobbering hound had backed off politely and proceeded about his business, not bothering her since. He did, however, now slyly elicit pats and head scratches from Gamagoori, Jakuzure, and Iori as he wove among them, not even interrupting their banter.

He looked back at Satsuki as Gamagoori's massive hand ruffled his ears, and the hound seemed to cock his head pointedly, batting his eye.

Peer pressure? Satsuki thought, exceedingly disconcerted as she glanced at her still-bickering companions. Was anyone else *seeing* this?

Kiryuuin Satsuki would be intimidated by no smiling hound. She raised her chin regally, glaring back at him until he gave up and trotted off into the green woods again. The princess waited until he had been gone a short while before she spoke.

"Inumuta," she said to the sulking summoner. Even the low issuing of her voice silenced the Circle, causing them to put their heated trade of insults on hold.

"Yes, milady?"

Satsuki spoke too quietly for those not nearest to her to hear - but Gamagoori and Iori at the edge of their row did not lean in or walk nearer to pry, or give off so much as a hint of curiosity; if Satsuki-hime intended for them to hear her, she would either gesture for their

approach or select her volume accordingly. "The distance we flew from the city… how early would Ryuu's pet have needed to set out, to be awaiting our arrival?"

"He's no pet, Satsuki-hime. Miss Ryuu names him her friend; she gave me an earful when I first called him a pet, when we gathered to plot your rescue…" He trailed, off, face flushing as Satsuki's inclining brow sent a warning - her look half severity, half disbelief. The summoner appeared troubled as he spent a few moments in thought. "There's no way he could have left later than the day before the gala. Even that seems like a stretch…"

"So a house dog was turned loose, found his way out of the city walls, and independently made a beeline for a meeting point in the wilderness… as a precaution? And here he is, full of vim and vigor after such a lengthy expedition… When did *you* last see him in the city? Have Ryuu or her cohorts made any remarks about him?"

He shook his head what little he could. "We met to finalize our plans with Ryuu a few days prior to the gala, at which time Senketsu was present. That's all I can say… Actually," he began, eyes lighting up, and Satsuki leaned nearer, intent. "I-I mean, that is… Soroi-san delivered Ryuu's suit to her the afternoon of the gala."

Satsuki frowned. Her almost fatherly servant, who was now far away.

Inumuta hummed, thoughtful as he considered the mystery. "I left him a mouse at the time, but I didn't go to the trouble of tying my senses to it; it was a messenger, not an intel-gatherer." Standing, he might have shrugged. "If Soroi-san did not see the hound during his visit, who knows… but if he *did* see him with the thieves that afternoon, it would spell quite the conundrum."

"And you're not concerned by this?"

"Pardon me, milady. I suppose… if something about Senketsu is amiss or otherwise worthy of concern, I do believe that as we currently stand, Ryuu would tell us. At least, I trust she would tell

you. Why not ask h-her-?" The end of the thought shuddered, and he broke into a coughing fit, pain on his sickly face, as Sanageyama looked down in concern. Satsuki touched a hand lightly to his shoulder as he caught his breath, ending their hushed discussion and bidding him to relax.

"She would tell me…?" Satsuki muttered it to herself, but as if on cue, Ryuu broke from the rustling canopy behind them and sailed over their heads. A grin was on the young woman's lips as she fell, flipping and alighting on the worn trail before the princess's group with a light-footed bounce.

The Sensei had given up on scolding her for failing to mind her recovery. Though Mako waved from up ahead, the senior thief completely ignored Ryuu's arrival, though his body language may just as well have beamed back the essence of his scowl. The dragon thief had been zipping around the trees and the woods for some time, homing back occasionally much like the hound; not letting her mending shoulder impede her, she seemed to be exploring as much for enjoyment as to scout.

Presently, however, she brandished a large, lifeless rabbit by the ears, turning to walk backwards from ahead of the Circle. "We oughta' be able to break for lunch soon."

"My back can't wait," Sir Uzu replied with a sarcastic dollop of cheer.

Even without knowing what he was on about, Ryuu shot him a look of general distaste. She held up the rabbit to Jakuzure, whose lip curled in a grimace; rolling her eyes, Ryuu tried Gamagoori, who let her deposit the catch in a sizeable hand.

This done, her eyes flickered over the lot of the Circle, narrowed and abruptly humorless. And then, flatly: "Your debt is increasing."

"Yes, yes, we *know* already," Nonon sighed.

"Oi," Uzu complained, tilting his head toward the tall ex-Enforcer, "that 'increase' better be mostly on the Chief, here. Whatever lunch is, I guarantee he'll eat twice as much as the rest of us combined."

"I suppose that is only fair," Ira acquiesced simply, though his face retained its permanent scowl.

"G-good! I'm glad we're in agreement!" Ryuu said crossly, arms folded below her chest. She eyed each of the Circle squarely in turn again, trying to look intimidating while keeping up her backwards walk.

"You know," Shirou noted, avoiding eye contact when her gaze crashed back into him. "The reward you were promised was no set amount to begin with. 'A hypothetical sack of gold and jewels,' was it?" He sweated, looking pointedly away as Ryuu's warning glower intensified, and strove to retain a diplomatic smile. "We've been over why we don't have your reward. We had to leave in a hurry. But if we do, er… overthrow the queen," he fumbled quickly, as if the concept remained a challenge to comprehend, spoken aloud. "That is - if that is our plan, and we should prove successful, at such a time we'll regain access to the royal treasury, and you'll get your reward-,"

"HUH?" Ryuu challenged sharply, causing him to jump as she leaned in his face, hands on her hips. The belligerent bark was more to shake up the easy target than anything. "I'm working without pay until we *save the entire kingdom* or die trying? You know how much debt you'll be in if I chew the bloody queen up for ya' and spit her out myself? I wanna swim in the royal treasury and *pick out* my reward with the biggest sack I can carry! I'm charging *interest* -!"

"You're spitting everywhere! Quit it already!" Nonon snapped, drawing the halfling's glare from the near-to-melting alchemist. The sore noblewoman snatched Sir Uzu's purse from his belt, and she ignored his complaint as she plucked out a gold coin, flicking it toward Ryuu. "Here, barbarian - no raising the 'debt' over lunch. Now buzz off! Off with you!"

Ryuu automatically jumped to snag the poorly-thrown coin. Landing, she raised a finger in preparation for an immediate rebuttal, opening her mouth - and paused with a snarl, idly rubbing and turning over the gold in her fingers, running her thumb over its smooth surface and grooved edge. Nonon watched blankly as Ryuu raised the coin without taking her eyes off her, sniffed it a few times, and shoved it into a pocket while turning away with a huff. The thief stormed back off the trail, petulantly grumbling a few choice words as she went. Satsuki shook her head, amazed.

What a character my… savior is, she thought, cringing innately. Quirks, she decided. Ryuu hosted a few unattractive quirks. She was still a good kid. Woman. Satsuki shouldn't think of her as a child. She *usually* didn't behave quite so much like one.

"The *hound*," Satsuki persisted, decisively cutting off the Circle before more bickering or badmouthing could kick off. They refocused, and Sir Uzu stowed the rude gesture he was struggling to direct toward the vanishing Ryuu despite the passenger in his arms.

Satsuki took a calming breath. "When we woke this morning, the Sensei checked on Ryuu's bruised ribs." All but fully mended, of course, along with the rest of the damage she'd taken.

"Yes," Ira recalled, nodding for her to continue.

"Ryuu stripped off her shirt and reached to her back to slit the bandages about her upper body, baring herself."

"Yes." Uzu nodded, not questioning. "N-not that I looked! I noticed, I looked *away*," he added hastily, and the princess raised a hand to silence him.

"She proceeded to massage her chest whilst complaining about the bandages," Satsuki said, eyes forward, "while the Sensei began to check her back and wounded side. I observed in surprise, a bit taken aback that she would do all this out in the open with so many others close by."

"Okay," Nonon said with a nod. Satsuki rubbed her temples.

"And that smiling hound walked over to plop himself down between Ryuuko and where I sat, barring my line of sight and *staring straight at me*, with a look as if to say 'Sure, it's out in the open, but *you're* the only one staring.'"

Houka hummed again. "Coincidence…?" he tried weakly. "He's protective of his master. Er, his person?"

"Dragon-person," Shirou pitched in.

"Friend," Ira asserted, earning nods or general sounds of agreement from the others.

"He's too *clever*," Satsuki maintained.

"You were paying an awful lot of attention to Ryuu?" Nonon blurted out belatedly, voice inching higher than her usual lyrical trill.

Satsuki blinked at her, oblivious. "I feel no discomfiture in appreciating that Ryuu's back muscles are impressively toned, especially for a woman's."

Nonon made a small, self-conscious sound that seemed to go unnoticed, while Uzu suppressed a high-pitched snigger and guffaw that resulted in a choking, sputtering noise.

Satsuki couldn't seem to hold the Circle's focus for long, but couldn't bring herself to berate them; they were all beyond exhaustion, addled and on edge, after the treacherous events of the night before. They deserved some waking hours to unwind, the princess told herself, shaking her head as Nonon picked up her hanging head and booted Uzu without warning in the shin, causing him to yelp and threaten to drop Houka again, while the summoner cried to be left out of it, whatever it was.

A patter of heavy paws, and the hound trotted up to Satsuki's side, batting his eye and seeming to offer a plump hare that hung limply from his jaws.

"Hm." She gave a nondescript sound of approval, hiding her suspicion as she studied him. "Good… job."

His tail wagged at double speed as she accepted the catch from him.

He kept pace with the group, looking up expectantly, hitting each with his jovial dog-smile in turn.

"What does he want?" Ira wondered, scratching the dog's ears as he walked near him. Senketsu ducked by and walked out ahead of them, circling with a whine.

Satsuki swallowed quietly, conscious of the rabbit's dead weight in her hand. She did not consider herself easily fazed. "… Debt?" she tried, not knowing what to expect.

He looked at her with a bark, eye lighting up.

Satsuki took a coin from Uzu's purse, holding it out. Coincidence… It had to be.

The dog barked again. Testing, she flicked the coin into the air and caught it.

His eyes tracked its motion.

Not coincidence.

Satsuki didn't know what that meant, and it unsettled her.

If she were to toss the coin, she wondered if he might snap it from the air in much the same way Ryuu had snagged hers.

"You can't pay Ryuu-chan and not pay Senketsu!" Mako called from up ahead, snapping Satsuki out of the bemused darting of her

thoughts. The Darkstrider was waving cheerily back at them. "That'd be unfair!"

Satsuki's mouth was dry. Making a note to see if she couldn't coax information from Mankanshoku in the near future, she returned her gaze to the attentively waiting hound.

"Senketsu?"

A bark. 'That is me,' he could have said, patient. Satsuki still couldn't help but talk slowly, as she might to a child.

"I will give this to Ryuu," she said, showing the coin again. "Is that alright? You don't have anywhere to hold it. Can you and Ryuu share?"

An appreciative 'wuff' on the understanding that had been reached, and the hound scampered off into the woods once more, content to proceed on his routine.

"That is… peculiar," Houka decided at last.

Satsuki's eyes were hard.

How did he know… that we paid Ryuu?

She turned the thought over until Sir Uzu loudly bemoaned his aching arms, and instigated the Circle's back-and-forth again. Satsuki's teeth began to grind as they grew louder, and she less-than-voluntarily tuned back in.

"Sir Sanageyama Uzu!" Satsuki said suddenly. Her shout was that of a commanding officer, dangerously stern.

"Ma'am!" he answered immediately, halting and standing straight. Had his arms not been occupied, Satsuki expected he would have clapped his fist to his heart in a salute.

The princess stepped up to him without a word, taking Houka from his arms. The summoner accepted the transfer silently, sealing his eyes in warm-faced chagrin as Satsuki briskly continued to walk, and the remainder of her Circle followed suit.

"… Satsuki-hime," Gamagoori began, and paused, unusually tentative. Guilt flickered in his eyes, and his tone was subdued. "You brushed it off before, but how severely *were* you injured in the battle?"

"You yourself only gave me bruises, Gamagoori. Perhaps a few aching ribs and joints," she said honestly. "Do not fault yourself. More than anything, my entire body aches from excess channeling, coupled with the strain of wearing - and struggling against - Junketsu."

What she meant to reassure had the opposite effect. The giant, after mouthing silently for a dismayed moment and beginning to be left behind, jogged ahead of them and turned, dropping to his knees and pinning his forehead to the dirt.

"Milady! Allow me to carry Inumuta!!"

"If you're going to carry him, stand up to take him from me."

"Right away, ma'am!"

Mercifully, Houka changed hands no more for the trip's remainder.

The party approached the village gate at a walk, Mikisugi at the fore. Ryuu was close behind, the princess on her right, Senketsu on her left, and the Circle trailing them closely; Mako had put on her mask, given Ryuu's shoulder a pat, and slipped away from the group minutes prior. The road they treaded was lined with sprawls of dry grasses and weeds, and the rough, packed dirt path itself was damp, just slightly pliant to their footfalls in the afternoon's misty rain.

Uzu, second perhaps only to Houka in street smarts among the Circle, had gone with Mikisugi into the last small town to barter meat and coin for supplies for the road, potatoes and salt, and a change of clothes for those most in need. Ryuu now wore a short-sleeved, belted tunic that hung to her hips over a simple pair of trousers - clothes that wouldn't be missed if she had need to transform in a hurry again. Satsuki-hime wore a cloak with the hood up over her robe and trousers. While she felt little trepidation toward donning Junketsu again, it had been decided that for the peace of mind of the people here, she should not wear the Godplate in their presence. She had agreed, and had no complaint with brushing out and binding her hair simply, in the style of a commoner.

The destination the band of newly minted fugitives now approached after a full day of travel was a small town - an impoverished settlement technically under the jurisdiction of a Crown-appointed governor, but disconnected and poorly policed. The place had boomed with the discovery of precious alchemical minerals decades ago, and been as swiftly abandoned by the Crown when those resources had dwindled; no money flowed from the capital's coffers to protect and maintain a settlement that produced no goods. The governor and his family ruled numerous piddling settlements in a large, sparsely populated area - nobles in a distant estate, comfortable and uninterested in the goings-on of the poverty-stricken lands they were saddled with. The force of such an overseer's authority was no stronger than the paper on which it was decreed.

In the absence of the Crown's eyes and hands, and in the presence of no shortage of sympathizers, the resistance had begun building the town up as one of several bases, and instilled order in the Crown's place. This was one of many destinations for the thieving money of the guild - to supply the rebels here, and to illegally forge the weapons they stockpiled.

Places like this dropped off the map - remote, forgotten, assumed when remembered to be frozen in the same state of rot in which it had last been observed. If it had been overrun by bandits, fiends, or

plague, the governor might not have learned of it for months, if ever. To have unceremoniously collapsed under its own barely-extant economy years ago, first abandoned by the able-bodied while those unable to move were slowly picked off by starvation, would have been par for the course. Throughout the kingdom, places like this were known to vanish without aid.

But not here. The rebellion had propped the town up, securing the pillars of survival and defense. As they neared the settlement, the faded path the party followed was lined with stretches of revived farmland, modest but self-sufficient. The place wasn't booming, nor should it have been, for its underhanded purposes. None but the lost would stumble into a settlement thought to be destitute - the lost, or those who approached with hands extended for business of the treasonous variety, who knew its quiet fall into obscurity for the faked death that it was.

When their unannounced party had been intercepted by 'bandits' - scouts on the path - the Sensei had first gone alone to the town nestled in the hills, to meet with the commanders stationed there and explain their situation. Satsuki had questioned the wisdom of revealing her identity even to a select few, but the Sensei had been adamant; those in charge needed to know at all times who entered their base, and particularly of individuals as dangerous as she.

The group now reached the settlement's border together, some of their number staring down archers who watched from buildings along the inside of a ramshackle wall. A dark-eyed, middle-aged woman in a chainmail cuirass stood at the opened gate with a few subordinates, watching Mikisugi and the others near with a frown on her face.

Mikisugi nodded at her, and she only raised a brow as he passed.

When the hooded figure passed before her, she reached out, throwing the covering back. Satsuki met her glower sidelong, neither supercilious nor meek, as she paused. The woman's breath sharpened, a fist clenching at her side.

Ryuu moved closer beside the princess, beginning to speak with a scowl, but halted when Satsuki held up a hand.

"If you want to strike me, strike me," Satsuki suggested, her demeanor bland as she bore the brunt of the fury in the rebel's eyes.

The captain's look would have been withering to most, but had no apparent impact on the stern-faced princess. "Striking you will do nothing for the lost battalions of Kokutani." Pain flashed in her expression - along with something darker. "Did you hear of them? The bodies bloated and rotted in the rain and sun. The townspeople who saw them, their friends and family, could spare no time in burying them, for the terror; they were frantic in working the mines and mills in the hope of appeasing the queen. Messengers ran horses ragged toward your great city to announce the strike was no more, and were slain by an *army* marching the opposite way. A settlement brought to the ground, slaughtered and burned, while the ones you killed probably still make fat the *birds*…" She looked away, teeth gritting in resentment.

Satsuki nodded slowly. "I had short of a dozen soldiers. I fell unconscious after the battle. Do you suppose my handful of troops erred in neglecting to build pyres for the eight hundred who had ambushed us, and risk another attack-?"

Satsuki saw the blow coming, but opted not to counter. The clean strike of a sword hilt about her cheek, and she dropped one foot back, and was steady. Ryuu held up her arms, dissuading the Circle's gut reaction of retaliation, in what Mikisugi might have called a rare bit of good judgment.

The princess straightened, dispassionately composed, as blood beaded about a corner of her lips. "Better?" she asked. "You know who I am and what I've done. So you know by extension how easily I could have avoided that attack, and how easily I could kill you."

"Oi!" Ryuu muttered. But the captain stepped back, faltering before the intensity of the Kiryuuin princess.

"Do you see that?" Satsuki continued with a step forward, maintaining her incredible pressure, though her voice was not gloating. "Fear. Fear of what your death would mean for the purpose, the *cause* to which you devote your entire being. I know such a thing well. I was faced with it in Kokutani… and I decided that my power was worth more than the power of eight hundred poorly-trained soldiers in the fight for this kingdom. It marked a most unfortunate waste that these two powers met in opposition, but while I can't weigh human life, I can *certainly* weigh power," she declared. "I fought them for my life, and the overzealous fools fought for theirs. Power for power. It is simple enough to see that the more useful side was the side that prevailed."

"Are you even human?" the woman hissed.

"If you have an issue with me," Satsuki said, "take it up with me after I've severed the queen's head. At present, we've a battle to win, and I should loathe to be more *wasteful* than I already have."

"Don't assume anyone believes your drivel, Junpakko," the captain said bitterly, though she stepped further back before daring to take her eyes off her, sheathing her sword. She looked to Ryuuko, and then spoke to Mikisugi. "*She's* the one?"

"Yes," the Sensei said, all professional. "The princess has promised us her full cooperation. And as you and I discussed, and as Satsuki-hime has agreed, Ryuu here will accompany her at all times within the settlement."

"Anything fishy from her, I'll knock her flat on her pompous arse," Ryuu assured her, grinning.

The captain considered her for a moment, and let out a humorless laugh as something dawned on her. She looked Ryuu up and down with an appraising eye, now seeing her in a new light. "It all makes sense… Doctor Matoi's monster, I take it?"

"The name's Ryuu," the younger woman said shortly, bristling.

The captain almost scoffed. "Ryuu, then. Yaota," she provided, by way of introduction. Her eyes perused the Circle, her expression settling quickly on something like distaste. The princess's people, as she saw it. In all fairness, Ryuu had initially measured them much the same. The captain turned back to Mikisugi and Ryuu.

"… Very well. You have my permission to enter. But the Kiryuuin may not carry a weapon."

Satsuki bowed her head to the slightest degree. "Ryuu, if you would be so kind," she said, without looking back at the thief.

Ryuu took the Bakuzan away, slinging the sheath over her own back by its leather strap. This done, Yaota stepped aside and waved them with one hand through the gate, eyes hard.

"Thank you, Captain," Satsuki said, effortless in her sleek confidence. "I look forward to working with you."

As they entered, Ryuu waited until Yaota and her soldiers with her were out of earshot before she spoke under her breath.

"You trying to stir up bad blood, or what?" She glanced around; people paused in their work or conversations when their party passed, sending wary looks toward the princess. A woman on a porch chair did a double take, dropping the garment she'd been sewing and rushing to steer two children into their small house; the windows promptly shuttered. A group of rebel soldiers in some training drill in a dirt lot grew distracted, rounding eyes inching Satsuki's way before their gazes would flee from her again, some looking queasy or pale. Ryuu frowned. And this was the princess at her most *inconspicuous* . The troops here must have heard some rumors, but had taken mere moments to pick out Satsuki as the princess from her posture or bearing, despite her present attire as common as Ryuu's. "Get to a new place, mouth off to the top dogs… Fat lot of good that'll do for your reputation."

"I expressed only facts," Satsuki noted. She dabbed subtly at the corner of her mouth with the back of her sleeve, untroubled.

"You could show a *little* remorse. You'll turn this place into a tinderbox quicker'n I can say 'Flashpoint.' I know you've got this tough image to keep up, but yeesh-,"

"And if I feel no remorse?"

Ryuu met her eyes squarely, skin prickling.

"Then…" Ryuu swallowed. Her right hand twitched at the memory of their hands meeting to shake, in the smoky courtyard on the night of the gala. "Then… however 'useful' you are, I'd have to start reevaluating how I feel about workin' with you. I sure as hell couldn't blame anyone else for doin' the same."

Satsuki lowered her head slightly, but remained stern. "I bear no remorse for selecting the only option that was available to me. I've never done any different. Every life I sacrificed along the way, I sacrificed with a measured decision to soften the queen's guard."

Ryuu made a sound, looking away.

No words passed between them until they were settled in a soup hall - an ancient public building with walls of stone and a slanted roof that looked to have had even its *patches* patched over many a time. The space inside was repurposed with tables and a counter serving gruel.

The tables seated four. Tasked with accompanying the princess, Ryuu sat across from her at one table, while the Circle filled another nearby; Nonon groaned over her sore feet, while Shirou pulled up an extra chair. The Sensei had split off from them, saying he would eat after a briefing with Yaota and her officers here.

Ryuu pressed down on a corner of the table, and it leaned, uneven. Getting a scowl from the princess as she rocked it again, Ryuu

shifted her attention to her bowl. She shortly found the gruel tasted vaguely of onion and beans. Shrugging, she shoveled in several bites, for she found herself ravenous.

Satsuki was more reserved with the bland soup, aware of the people who had hastily changed tables to distance themselves, and of the lookouts who had been silently posted about the hall when they'd arrived. Reassuringly, she'd watched the old man at the serving station ladle her soup from the same pot as the rest, easing her natural suspicion of poisoning attempts. The silent Ryuu across from her evidently bothered herself with no such concerns, already finished with her bowl.

"You don't plan to speak to me anymore, then?" Satsuki asked after finishing a bite.

Ryuu was sullenly scratching Senketsu's ears. She raised a brow at the ghost of humor in Satsuki's voice, but for the most part ignored her. If the princess found her childish for it, she didn't care either way.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you, thief."

Ryuu rolled her eyes at the order - and Satsuki stood to reach suddenly across the table, grabbing her about the chin and turning her head toward her. The Kiryuuin's look was coldly superior. Senketsu had stood up at Ryuu's side, eye trained on the assailant and expression suddenly devoid of its earlier warmth.

The thief's surprise waned, and she frowned, grabbing the royal's hand to peel it from her face. "You wanna stir shit up now? Do it and I really will kick your arse. Act high and mighty all you want. I haven't missed it - how you've been draggin' yer feet since the Founding Day Gala's festivities. I bounce back faster than you. If you wanna go at it in spite of that, I'll happily pay you back for a bit of the punishment you and Junketsu put me through."

The princess swept her hand away, and the thief released it. A smug look flickered in Ryuu's eyes, gloating as the Kiryuuin's chilled silence confirmed her observations.

"How about you do yourself a favor and take your seat, Kiryuuin? You can glare daggers all you want from there."

"Watch your tongue, pissant," Satsuki warned. "While you pat yourself on the back for a most unremarkable display of insight, say naught you'll regret. You're either reckless or a fool if you suppose I'll remain at half-strength for long."

Ryuu flashed her teeth. "There you go, talkin' like you run things. You're no princess anymore, least of all here. Once heir to a despised throne, and it's safe to bet you're not even that much any longer. And what do you suppose the rebels will think of the bloodthirsty Junpakko, if we start a ruckus here? Remember what I said about that tinderbox?"

"I don't need you to tell me that." The princess's eyes flickered toward one of the lookouts by a door of the hall. Nervously watching. Satsuki exhaled, sitting down again. "Ryuuko… Whatever you think of the methods, this is how I survived. Against a foe of overwhelming strength, do you think I have efficiency to spare on trifles of sentimentality? I've gotten this far by calculating."

"Calculating?" Ryuu finally sneered, hand going back to a smiling Senketsu's ears as he sat beside her again.

The princess only nodded, solemn. "If those calculations indicate the slaughter of hundreds of innocents is necessary to save even more, I won't look back. I *can't* . If there were a hundred people worth saving in the world and the most could be saved by killing forty-nine, what else could I do?"

"That's ridiculous…"

"It's a thought exercise, Ryuuko. What would *you* do, in such a predicament?" Satsuki thought for a moment. "Rather, of a hundred people worth saving, let us say it is possible to save at most twenty, but only by killing the other eighty. If all are left as is, or if any number short of eighty fall by your hand, an outside force will unfailingly wipe out the remainder, leaving the entire hundred dead. What do you do?"

"I save all of them," Ryuuko spat, glowering at the woman across from her. The princess's intellectual calm was suddenly infuriating.

"And if you fail?"

"Then I'll have done the best I ruddy well can. To avoid an outcome… a *cost* I could never accept."

Satsuki's lips formed the barest trace of a smile below her cold eyes. "A curious answer, for someone who once told me she cares only for herself."

Ryuu crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair. "I get where you're coming from, but your 'thought exercise' isn't worth jack in reality. You can't boil down slaughter to a bunch of calculations - it ain't that simple."

"Enlighten me." Satsuki studied her evenly, welcoming the opportunity to pick Ryuu's brain.

"People aren't so predictable," Ryuu said, showing her teeth again. "The value of trust in others - real, solid, human trust - is something that's a little tougher to factor in, I'd reckon. And you can't tally up that value by *calculating* it, either," she said, tapping a finger to her temple. "The only way to uncover it is to take the dive, and learn it for yourself." She thought of the Darkstrider she'd first encountered so long ago, eyes softening. "It pays you back in unexpected ways."

"A gamble, then." Satsuki's eyes narrowed. She was not ignorant to the reach of her charisma and the value of her ability to inspire

others. She took care to remember the face and name of every soldier she'd ever commanded, and to project the unyielding strength and leadership that brought out the most in her underlings' ranks, demanded respect, and guaranteed the loyalty and obedience of all who served her. But to trust, and depend on, the untested? The suggestion earned from her a scoff.

"And if the risk is worth it? No - if it turned out, despite whatever you think about *efficiency* this and *precision* that, to be not only the best way, but the only way, to beat these incredible odds you're up against? If the odds are that bad, why *not* throw some uncertainty into the mix?"

The princess's sad smile then was sincere. "Ryuu… You might be more human than I."

When Satsuki said nothing more, Ryuu bit her lip.

"Look, I - I know you've been through some stuff… but I also know you're capable of putting your trust in people. The Circle Jerks show that much. Believe in a few more people, look out for them, respect them, and they'll look out for you."

"This isn't about me," the princess said, eyes dark. "It's about victory."

"I'm not dense enough to think that victory against the Crown's forces doesn't count on you," Ryuu asserted. She held Satsuki's glare, sincere as she could be. "I might've just gotten roped into this quest to overthrow the queen, but if I'm going to fight, I'd like to *win* . If that means working with you, I'll work with you even if I can't stand the sight of you. I'd *prefer* to be able to trust you, and become someone you can trust, too. Who knows how possible that is… but I'd hope the two of us can get there."

Ryuu had begun to reach for Satsuki's hand where it rested on the table between them. But something that had faltered in the princess's eyes hardened again, guarded; Ryuu paused short of the

touch, folding her hands on the table and looking away as she remembered herself.

"At our own pace, of course," Ryuu muttered.

Satsuki crossed her arms, shutting her eyes and taking a breath. Her chin was high when she spoke again. "Trust must flow in both directions, Ryuuko. And there are *innumerable* things I don't know about you."

"Try me."

"Of chief importance - what exactly *are* you? Why are you what you are?"

"You can't just ask someone why she's a dragon. Rude!"

The princess leveled a serious glare toward the quipping woman across from her.

Ryuu rested her elbows on the table, chortling. "You could've asked that any time, really. It's not as spectacular as you might expect."

The thief was thoughtful as she spoke. "See, my old man's one hundred percent human. Once upon a time, he was a knight. My ma, wherever she is… apparently she was a dragon-human, same as the way I turned out. The knight and the dragon fell in love, and he fled the city to be with her, y'know? Packed up, deserted the Queen's Own and everything! But I guess after having me, Ma… she didn't want to raise me, after all," Ryuu said, eyes shut above a thin smile. "Change of heart, or somethin'."

"Ryuu…" Satsuki began, but the halfling only gave a rough laugh.

"So, she up and vanished," Ryuu said, shrugging in a show of indifference. "Back to wherever she came from, I guess. And the old man brought me up, until I came to stay in Middle City with the Sensei when I was younger."

"There *must* be more to it," Satsuki said, scrutinizing her. But Ryuu seemed genuine about her words as she shrugged again.

"There you have it - now you know as much as I do, Princess."

"And it doesn't bother you, not knowing more about… what you are?"

Ryuu's eyes narrowed slightly, shrewd. "You seem to think you know something I don't."

You helped me tame Junketsu. But what that meant, Satsuki still wasn't certain. She clenched her teeth. "You're sure your father doesn't know more?"

"How the hell would I know? It's not like the old coot ever had much time to spare chattin' with me. When he did have the time, I didn't want to ruin it bringin' up gloomy stuff. Excuse me if my kid self didn't pry too hard into her bastard ancestry!"

Ryuu's hands on the table had tightened into fists; she realized she'd begun to raise her voice, and sat back heavily again, chewing her lip.

Satsuki lowered her head. Bastard ancestry - Ryuu might have actually been onto something. An illegitimate offshoot somewhere along the carefully contained Kiryuuin line was no impossibility. The ample darkness in the Radiant Dynasty's history wrapped around tales of purges, of commoners suspected to have been the product of such trysts - put down mercilessly with their families and their own offspring, not in the Square but in their homes, under cover of night. The blood that bent the will of King Beasts was a symbol of divine favor and dynastic might, a reminder of the unquestionable right to rule won by the heroism of the Kiryuuin of old. Even in an era when dragons had vanished to the point of myth, what the purges hoped to prevent now sat right in front of Satsuki. The chance survival of a bastard bloodline seemed a more plausible explanation than anything for a random thief's demonstration of the tamers' power.

But the brooding woman across from Satsuki was no random thief. The emergence of the royal blood's power alongside Ryuu's evident draconic heritage seemed too outlandish to chalk up to coincidence. Tamer and dragon, in one body… And the hermit deserter, Sir Matoi, no doubt residing near the heart of the conundrum.

"If I've touched a nerve, forgive me," Satsuki said eventually. But the glint in her eye remained; wheels were spinning. If what Ryuu had been told was true, the implications were stunning. "Another dragon-human… Do you realize what this means, Ryuu? Dragons vanished from this land ages ago - some scholars believed them extinct. To find not only you, but potentially others, hiding themselves… Imagine if we could convince even one or two more *ryuu* to stand with the rebellion. It would tip the scales in our favor-!"

"And if they weren't on our side?" Ryuu put in. "If they didn't join us? 'Those that will not be tamed shall perish' - those words came out of your mouth not too long ago. I'll take your word that you're not out to tame me or snuff me out anymore - but if I were turned against you, like you'd feared, that wouldn't be the case now would it?"

Satsuki's expression was hard. "I just told you what I'd do, to save as many as possible."

Ryuu smirked. "And if saving people called for wiping out dragons, Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime would spearhead their genocide herself." She shook her head. "I don't find it as thrilling a thought as you do, that there might be more. Relations go sour, and it's you or them that'll be getting killed. I vote that if they're out there enjoying peaceful lives, and they're not interested in this human conflict, we leave them out of it."

Satsuki knew Ryuu wouldn't budge on the matter, with that; and if Ryuu's father was the only one who knew the identity of Ryuu's mother, and Ryuu was among a scant few who knew where to find him, there was little hope of uncovering much further just now. "All right," Satsuki acquiesced. "Okay. I will respect your decision."

Ryuu smiled appreciatively at her; there was something almost endearing in the innocence that shone through. She scratched Senketsu under the chin when he nuzzled at her arm for more attention.

A human conflict, Satsuki thought grimly, even as she gave a reassuring smile in return. *If only this war was so simple as deposing one mad queen…*

She looked up as a bugle sounded somewhere in the distance.

Another soon sounded, nearer, and within seconds, several seemed to be bellowing out at once. The greater part of the mess hall's occupants rose up quickly, scarfing down gruel and abandoning their chairs, hurrying for the door and discarding bowls and cups in a washing bin as they left.

Satsuki met eyes with Ryuu. They made their way outside, the rest of their party not far behind.

In the disorderly swarms of the settlement's occupants, in the noise of resounding horns and people who shouted to be heard over them as they moved, Satsuki picked out currents of traffic in the crowd. She proceeded in the direction the majority seemed to be heading, her pace steady but quick.

"What's going on?" Ryuu asked at her side.

"That's what I'm off to determine," Satsuki said. "Or is my escort wary of wandering about without an authority's express permission?"

Ryuu shot her a look, but kept with her brisk pace on the dirt street.

In a minute, the sounding alarm horns waned and faded, leaving the rumble of steps and the excited rustle of dozens of conversations prominent in the air. After passing a number of cabins, shops, pens and chicken coops, the pathway spilled out into a yard near a stable and what Satsuki surmised to be a barracks. Confusion reigned;

people shouted over each other. A man in an iron cuirass stood by the door of the armory, yelling about it not being a drill.

The rebel soldiers that had amassed seemed unsure of whether they were supposed to gear up; if some specific signal had been intended for conveyance by the horns, the meaning had been garbled. Tangling bodies pushed past each other, trying to find answers or hear their officers. One man, bristling, grabbed at another who shouldered past him - and the other turned, throwing a swing that was narrowly dodged. More shouting, as some backed away from the two and others pushed forward, trying to stop them. A red-faced officer's shouts were swallowed by the noise, spit flying soundlessly from his lips as his mouth shaped protracted syllables, a caricature of rage. More than a hundred ramshackle troops were filling the yard, and at least three more fights had broken out.

The Circle had gathered around Satsuki and Ryuu at the edge of the yard, perplexed by the chaos before them. The princess herself beheld the scene, speechless. Then her head lowered, a slight curl to her lip as sudden intensity roared in her eyes.

Ryuu shivered, a chill cropping up in the base of her neck and fluttering all the way down her spine. Satsuki inhaled.

"YOU SHABBY LOUSES CALL THIS A MUSTER?!!" she roared, storming forward.

Her projecting words had miraculously retained form over the cacophony, quieting the nearest of the rebel soldiers. Eyes snapped toward her, and a shudder rippled through the crowd with the realization of who had spoken.

"This is rubbish!! Form up your ranks! Quit that prattling!"

She had the crowd's attention - but for one of the men who'd begun to brawl, who took a shot at his distracted opponent. Before he could hit, Gamagoori was there, grabbing the attacker's arm and headbutting him straight to the ground. The other man went for the

downed one, and the half-giant plucked him from his feet by the back of his robe. He tossed him back with a relatively gentle flick of his wrist, in doing so volunteering several in the ring of bodies that had surrounded the brawlers to catch him, nearly toppling as they did.

"Who else is fighting?!" Gamagoori boomed, so fiercely that the entire crowd seemed to shake. He did not brandish his fists or otherwise threaten them; merely standing at his full height, twin shields on his back, chin high and face severe, proved imposing enough.

Satsuki stepped forward beside him. "Did you mishear me? Form your ranks, and await the instructions of your commanding officer! I'll fight alongside no 'soldiers' who lack the most basic tenets of discipline!"

Ryuu looked to the knight and the mages of the Circle, who only watched their princess with knowing smiles - admiration, amusement, or both. Flabbergasted, the half-dragon joined in watching Satsuki-hime bark orders until, within minutes, the troops had straightened into an orderly grid. Many a soldier self-consciously adjusted his or her posture under the Kiryuuin's presiding stone gaze as she strolled in front of their ranks, arms folded behind her back.

Ryuu smiled in spite of herself, shaking her head. She'd said the princess didn't run anything anymore, and it may have been true - but the Kiryuuin woman held a magnetism that relied not on the sway of title or rank to get others to follow. Ryuu couldn't deny it was impressive to witness.

"Well, ain't she quick to blow her top…" Ryuu muttered.

"For someone like Satsuki-hime, it's appalling to see troops scrambling about like chickens with their heads cut off," Sir Uzu noted beside her, stepping up with a weary Houka's arm around his shoulder. "That much is true, but also… perhaps it smarts a bit too distinctly of the memory of Kokutani, huh?"

Ryuu raised a brow. "She's barking at a bunch of troops out of frustration, over… eight hundred practically unrelated people trying to kill her?"

"Not for their trying. For failing." It was Houka who explained, with a grimace. "Satsuki-hime says the rebel battalions of Kokutani were tragically quick to lose coordination. When the struggle broke out, she targeted their leaders… and the chain of command, if there was one, effectively disintegrated. *That's* how hundreds of combatants failed to kill the single great warrior before she awakened Junketsu's power."

"She watched men and women with weapons in hand hurl their lives at her with enough inefficiency to bring a good commander to tears," Ira said to the other bystanders, level. "Passion, desperation, devotion to a purpose - for so much to be squandered is nothing short of intolerable. It saved her life as their enemy. As their ally, she'll bear witness to no such catastrophic failings of discipline again." Only then did he sport a slight smirk. "Not on her watch."

Sanageyama nodded. "One's drive to fight is a big factor, but it only goes so far on its own," he admitted. "For the right leader, a man can find his inner strength, and combine it with his will to fight, to the utmost of his potential. He can offer no less than his all, faced with a leader like her - and sensing effectiveness in place of futility, he strives to improve, that he may offer even more. Do you get it yet, thief? For our lady to command an army is for her troops to suffer the fewest losses possible. For a soldier to serve under and obey her is for him to be instilled with the confidence that his powers, his efforts, are being channeled to the greatest effect. Those who will fall are thus afforded the dignity of knowing with sureness, by their commander's competence, that they fall not in vain."

Ryuu hummed, sinking into a crouch. Absently she petted Senketsu, while the hound nuzzled at her shoulder. There remained a good deal she didn't know about the princess, after all.

But at the end of the day, does she see soldiers who would die for her as people, or no more than assets - perfected tools, numbers on the scales? Her expression steeled as she watched the straight-backed woman pace scrutinously before the ranks again. Whatever the answer, one thing was clear: what Satsuki-hime offered the resistance was something they couldn't easily win without.

"What's happened here?"

Satsuki's attention turned from her inspection toward the new arrivals. Captain Yaota neared her at the front of the yard with a brusque walk, distrust plain in her eyes. Mikisugi and some others trailed behind her, flustered.

Satsuki faced the woman, bowing her head to a measured degree as she stopped before her. "I've organized your troops," she explained simply, gesturing toward the orderly ranks of anxious, but quiet, soldiers.

The captain frowned, but with some reluctance the hostility in her stance faded. Nodding with a long look at the princess, she stepped past her to address the troops.

Ryuu sidled up to Mikisugi, frowning as she listened. "Marching out?" she muttered questioningly to him, when the captain announced their plans. A number of them would be heading toward the capital, joining with allies in a nearby settlement along the way. "We're not… going straight for the capital? Bloody *heck* ."

"Attacking the capital straight away? Of course not," Mikisugi whispered, clenching his teeth briefly. "We're intercepting a convoy that's got a hold of some rebel prisoners, and we'd rather do it well *before* they reach the capital."

Ryuu's eyes darkened. "The crackdown was more than big talk and speeches, huh?"

A nod. "It's begun. The Queen's Own led a raid against a base they discovered, a lot like this one. Rounded up a few dozen, if the messenger's info is on the mark."

"And if they get to the city…" Ryuu said, watching the captain rally the troops. Prisoners of the Crown, charged with treason. A fraction might be held for interrogation, and the rest…

Mikisugi nodded grimly. "They're dying in the Square."

~ ~

Allies Begrudging

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/24c8/f/2018/057/5/f/ryuukosenketsuyoung_1600_by_hinata0321-dc4f555.png]

End

The Way Forward

Chapter 19: The Way Forward

Hi again! Medium-size chapter this time around. I'm a comfortable bit ahead in terms of writing, so I'll see if I can't up the pace of updates for a bit!

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Nineteen \ The Way Forward

Satsuki passed another night without sleep.

For minutes at a time she might shut her eyes and clear her head, willing the tension from the base of her skull to ease. Then her attention returned to the maps and documents before her, and the parchment on which she sketched and scrawled and drew up plans in the light of a small oil lamp. Materials Jakuzure and Sanageyama had, at her request, managed to procure the previous afternoon.

She took a breath, poring over hypothetical troop movements, locations, travel times. She touched the end of her pencil to her chin, posture flawless as she surveyed her work on the desk. With the forces split properly, it could work… Rather, it would have to do. She would see to her plans' success.

And she would do so alone, if certain obstructionists would be of no assistance.

-"*You want a troop to command?" Yaota, initially skeptical of her request for an audience, is now appalled, bordering on indignant.*

"Are you mad?"

"*I excel as a commander. I will serve beneath you, but would lead a small unit ahead to-,"*

"*To win my soldiers over? To plant confusion in our ranks?"*

"*I harbor no such objectives. Are you so fearful of usurpation that you can't bear the thought of exposing your troops to a more charismatic leader than yourself?"*

"*Get out. I shouldn't have even agreed to hear you, Junpakko."*

"*At what point will I be allowed to so much as* train *soldiers, Captain?" Satsuki demands, changing angles. "Would you squander expertise that could save their lives?"*

"*You are not trusted, Kiryuuin Princess. You are no friend of the rebellion. And you expect me to believe you're concerned about saving lives?" Her disgust is plain. "Consider yourself fortunate you're not being treated as a prisoner. You can spend your exile from the capital here, but you'll tread nowhere near my troops, nor our battlefields."*

"*With all due respect," chimes Satsuki's chaperone, raising her hand, "that's absurd. Besides, I'd be leaving the princess here unattended if she can't come along-,"*

"*You're not coming along either, Drakeblood."*

"*… Heh?" Ryuu, elbow propped on the back of her chair, sits up straight. "Now hold on, just a moment!"*

"*Forget it, Ryuu," Satsuki says, holding out her hand. "She has no need of our opinions. I am a soldier, as well; I am nothing without respect for order, and for my commanding officers, however flagrantly erroneous their judgment. Very well, Captain - We take our leave."-*

At a soft whine, the princess looked up. Ryuu remained sound asleep in her cot in the inn room they'd been put in; the sound had come from near Satsuki's empty cot. There Senketsu had sat up, single eye resting on the princess at the desk.

"Hush," Satsuki whispered. "Go back to sleep."

The hound's ears quirked. He tilted his head questioningly to the side, and then nipped at the corner of the untouched pillow on her cot, shaking it slightly. He let it go, staring meaningfully at her again.

She frowned. Ignoring him, she turned back to the desk.

The padding footfalls were light before he shoved the pillow onto Satsuki's lap and retreated to his spot by Ryuu, hopping quietly onto their cot and lying down at her side. He put his head down with a grumble, still watching Satsuki. Behind him Ryuu rolled over with a groggy noise, the steady rhythm of her breath unbroken as she wrapped her arm around, seemingly gravitating to him; Satsuki knew she shivered in her sleep, with the cold.

Satsuki's frown did not let up. But she took the pillow and propped it behind her back in the chair.

When she glanced back to the thief and hound, Senketsu's eye was shut. Ryuu's shivering seemed to have lessened.

The one you're used to looking after… is quite the handful, I imagine.

Sighing, Satsuki refocused on her work.

The queen's smile was sleek as she strolled down a castle hall tinted with the light of dawn through stained glass. Her elegant white dress, soft orange with the predominant tone of the morning's glow.

She had freshly adjourned a meeting of her war council. The generals and high-ranking knights present in the capital had

gathered on short notice for her summons, and would be scrambling to whip up the forces required to carry out her commands. Such tireless workers they were - eager in their thirst for blood, thrilled by the promise, the prospects, now made tangible before them.

The Radiant Dynasty's vast kingdom had seen no true war in centuries; outlying lands that had been conquered and drawn in long ago, the neighbors the Old Kingdom had quarreled endlessly with, had come to be seen more as extensions of the kingdom than colonies of an empire. They had been broken down and built up again, managed by Crown-appointed overseers as was any territory within the original kingdom's reach.

Yet her land had remained throughout the ages a militaristic one, proud forces ritualistically trained only to be dispatched for bandits, fiends, at most occasional uprisings of laughable consequence. In the most uneventful of years, she took care to whet their appetite for bloodshed, to stoke the flames with tender care. She relished in knowing her armies for a destructive force, commanders ever waiting to destroy whatever enemies she loosed them upon. Targets to hit made not a chore, but a prize. The queen knew that the prospect of mobilization on the largest scale in recent history in a hunt for dissidents - coupled with the gracious leniency of the orders she had supplied - would in all likelihood sow chaos across the realm. So misguided revolutionaries who presumed to know injustice would now know terror, the like of which they had only ever imagined.

She smiled to think how the coming months would unfold.

Eyes flicking toward a disturbance in one of the courtyards below, she paused, gliding to a window and peering out. A finger brushing at her lips, she skulked back down the hall to enter a stairwell.

The scene in the yard was a noisy one. Amused knights and courtly mages seemed to have gathered in loose disarray - a rarity, for the groups did not frequently care to mingle. Their attention was on a group of Enforcers near a corner of the yard, and a grimy creature they kicked and beat savagely at on the ground, yelling as they did.

"A marvel, this one is," a brightly-dressed mage with a satchel of books was quipping with a colleague, smiling despite the distaste in his tone. His nose was high. "No matter how much they rough him up, the oaf won't let go."

"Aye," another young man agreed. "One would think he might realize the more pressing concerns on his hands as he was being dragged out here. But no - he clutched his bit of garbage tight. I wonder if the poor sod tried eating a few bites on the way…"

"If he did, it's bound to be making its way back up," the first mage chortled.

As the queen walked past them, their chatter and others' drew to a screeching halt.

"And what, pray tell, is the cause of this commotion on castle grounds?"

At the monarch's clear intonation, the Enforcers were stunned. Ragyou recognized the man who would have been Gamagoori Ira's next in command as he wheeled to greet her, his skin whitening as he fumbled a moment and dipped in a bow.

"Your Majesty!" he stammered, eyes darting side to side. He shot a look at one of his subordinates. "Y-you! Remove the miscreant from the queen's sight!"

"Newly-appointed Chief of Enforcers," the queen interjected, humor in her eyes for how quickly the title had passed owners again. "That is quite enough. Explain."

"Ma'am! This commoner was found rummaging through the… what remains of the grand ballroom, ma'am. The cleanup has suffered delay, but we've rounded up quite a number who thought to sneak in - beggars, common thieves, even some of the castle's own servants…" He ground his teeth. "The destitute descend like vermin on the wreckage of the gala, eager to make off with rotting food.

We've been keeping a watch on the area, and throwing them in the dungeons. To dare cross Upper City just to soil your Majesty's doorstep with their filth… !"

The queen held up a hand. "Bring him before me."

"Your Majesty?"

She raised a brow. The Enforcer hurriedly bowed his head and shuffled toward the cringing man on the ground again. He grabbed him by the arm and shirt collar and roughly coaxed him up and forward, letting him topple before the white-clad queen.

The man's skin and threadbare clothes were visibly marred with dirt; his hair was thin on top, sprouting gray though he may have been as young as thirty, by the queen's estimation. With commoners, it often was hard to tell. He was short a few teeth, and though his lowly posture gave no aid in gauging him, he looked indelibly scrawny in the way that those brought up in malnourishment almost never grew large. His face was bloody, his sunken eyes full of pain surpassed only by his dread, and he shook unsteadily as he tried to rise enough to kneel properly for the towering queen, his head low.

"Speak."

He seemed alarmed at the command; moisture welled in his eyes. "I - Your Majesty, please, I beg your mercy. I am wretched for trespassing, but I sought only the food, nothing more. My family…" His hands shook on a large, misshapen loaf of bread he still clutched at his chest; it bore host to lightened patches that had begun to fuzz with mold. "I… My kids are hungry, and I heard… I thought… if it would all simply go to waste… !"

"When the queen permits you to speak, you apologize properly, roach!" the Enforcer barked, using his boot to drive the man's face to the ground.

"Release him," Ragyou said.

The Enforcer's sneer of disgust fell away as he looked to the queen again, shocked.

"Will you have me repeat myself?" Ragyou warned, voice gently firm. She sniffed, flicking open a folding fan. "Get this poor man inside for some food and tea. And send some of your men to gather up all the food they can find about the ballroom, and load it up on carts. We'll bring it into town. Bring the other scavengers you captured out from the dungeons, as well."

"Y… yes, ma'am!" the new chief answered, and snapped to issuing orders to the nearest Enforcers.

The man on the ground sobbed, emotion wracking his wiry form. "Glorious queen… !" he whimpered as another Enforcer now helped him to his feet, towing him toward a door. "Thank you! Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Shocked mages and knights alike bowed quietly as the queen turned to go, calling for the frazzled Chief Enforcer to follow. But the queen spoke no further as they strode through the hallways, ascended a winding stairwell, and emerged on a path to one of the highest balconies, facing out toward the city. The Enforcer was a clumsily ambitious one, from an inconsequential house that flaunted its noble status without commanding much wealth or sway; he seemed still to be struggling to let the good fortune of his promotion catch up to him, and to project the image of a model Chief. He hung back respectfully as the queen rested her hands on the balustrade.

Ragyou's form was illuminated. The Enforcer had but a moment's warning to shield his eyes before multicolored radiance sprang intensely across the capital, bathing, drowning the cityscape in the ruler's splendor for minutes on end.

Only once the display receded did the queen turn to the visibly shaken man behind her. She strolled past, supplying him instructions as he snapped to and followed.

To mark the start of a season most festive…

A Celebration was in order.

"I know I needn't caution you, of all people, on the ill effects of dragging yourself on past your limits. The right brew might bolster your body's chances of keeping up with that unflinching resolve, but Augment is meant to boost your strength - not to bring you up from *nothing* to a *fractional* level of strength. Multiplicative - the weaker one is at the baseline, the less effect it will have. And the longer you force yourself to run on nothing, the more rapidly your body will weaken."

"Well aware. I've been versed in magic theory since before *you* knew you were a mage," Satsuki reminded gently, taking the offered flask from a sizeable hand. She looked up at the man, seeing the lines of worry etched into his stern face. "Thank you for your concern…"

"What is it?" Gamagoori asked, seeing her studying him in the shade of the overhanging roof they'd met under. She lost a breath in a laugh, looking away.

"Nothing; you've simply a different look, about here," she explained, brushing a hand across the lower portion of her face. "Do try to get your hands on a shaving kit, would you?" she suggested. "I never realized the effect a few days would have on your countenance at this point."

"Apologies!" he said, flustered. He stood straighter. "Please forgive my unkempt presentation; I have been lax. Since it first began to sprout, I've always kept it under strict control, as - as per the Enforcers' code of personal appearance…" He trailed off.

"Fret not," Satsuki said. "An eventful few days, we've had…"

"Aye," he agreed, running a thumb thoughtfully across the whiskers overtaking his jaw and upper lip. Remembering himself, he frowned

and nodded toward the Fortify potion in Satsuki's hand again. "Drink that gradually," he urged quietly, for whatever it was worth. He held no illusions that the reminder would sway any decisions she had made. "Please."

Satsuki did not let herself begin to shake until he had gone on his way. She leaned against the shed behind her, blinking at the predawn sunlight on the hamlet, on a dusty old water pump, on faded dirt paths and through the rafters of empty buildings. She had stolen away from the active heart of the settlement, where troops were gathering and preparing to set out; this was no more than a withered appendage, a corner of town that remained a ghost of the collapsed mining boom.

Confident she was alone, Satsuki let out her breath before downing half of the acrid potion in one long draught.

She hissed. It was a strain even for the imbibed magics to latch onto her flesh, to awaken and invigorate bundles of muscle fibers that bunched and relaxed in confused spasms. In a painful few minutes, her shaking subsided.

She had managed to conceal the extent of her declining condition even from Gamagoori's watchful eye. The toll Junketsu had taken on her in her last week in the castle, let alone to unleash its full power in battle, was tremendous; but now was not the time to rest.

Standing straight, she pressed a hand to her heart. She prepared to flare her power for the briefest moment possible. Her eyes snapped open.

Ryuu no Yousou!

Pebbles jumped in the dirt; swirls of dust puffed out along the earth as the air settled again.

Within moments, she sensed as a new presence manifested. "I wondered if you would come… The texts always said your senses

are sharp."

The masked figure kneeling on the roof of the shed tilted her head to a minute degree. "You finally called, so I've come, Satsuki-hime-sama." Her voice, unusually level.

"What duty have you to behave as a Kiryuuin vassal now?" Satsuki asked, stepping forward from the shed. "After all this dynasty has put you through…"

"The Satsuki-hime-sama before me is worth serving - that's what I decided," the Darkstrider said, slipping to the ground. "It's what my ancestors would want, I bet. If you'll have me…"

Satsuki looked back at her, over her shoulder. However the read of her heart, it had taken Satsuki time to believe the Mankanshoku was up to no treachery. She still could not trust her - not fully. Years of prejudice were challenging to overcome; and Satsuki could only be wary of someone whose powers she could not accurately gauge. She sighed. "You cannot have two masters, can you? What of your loyalty to Ryuu?"

"Ryuu-chan isn't like that, exactly…" She looked down. "But you're right - if you were to order me to do anything that would hurt her, then in that moment, I couldn't be a perfect vassal to you."

"Is your bond so strong?" Satsuki almost sneered, though she appreciated the Darkstrider's honesty.

"She's special… even more than she knows. If my ancestors didn't agree with my looking out for her, I'd have to respectfully disobey their wishes, too."

Satsuki made a sound in thought. "Remove your mask, would you? If you're to be an accomplice in a rebellion against the Crown, the Crown's rules for your people shan't bind you here." Seeing her hesitate, Satsuki nodded encouragingly. "Is it why you chose not to

enter the settlement with us? Because you would have to don the mask, and be looked upon with suspicion?"

The shorter woman turned her mask to prop on the side of her head, amber eyes calm. Her gaze was low, deferential. "Our group would draw enough distrust from the folks here, with hime-sama and her Circle. I didn't want to add any more than necessary, and make the mission harder for you…"

Satsuki turned back, facing her fully. "If you went without the mask that labels you a Darkstrider, there would be no such issue. But you feel obligated to wear it, even so far from the capital?"

A nod. "Any time I traverse the boundaries of a settlement in the kingdom. This rule can only be waived by the Kiryuuin. Outside of that, the only time we bend the rules is for the specific duration of a job that requires the mask's removal."

"I can see your sense of duty is strong. Very well, then." Satsuki strode toward the other woman, head high. "Mankanshoku Mako. As a contestant for the Crown in a kingdom divided, and as a bearer of the blood your ancestors served, I, Kiryuuin Satsuki, hereby grant you permission to remove your mask as you see fit… and as necessary, for the work of serving discreetly as my sandal-bearer."

The brown-haired woman's shock was palpable, in a start of surprise that snapped her head up. "Wh-what? I couldn't possibly… To hold such an honor…?"

"I care not of the circumstances of one's birth or station, among those I deem fit to enter my service. I happen to have need of a sandal-bearer at my side… if you are willing to accept the title?"

Mako's lip wrinkled, eyes moistening before she ducked her head. She wiped her eyes and knelt, nodding. "Of course, hime-sama!"

Satsuki returned her smile when she touched her shoulder and bade the joyful Darkstrider to rise.

Do I grow soft? she wondered, but her smile was thin, with the thoughts that raced behind her tired eyes. *I've secured a powerful ally, she is happy… We both benefit. There is no shame in this…*

Moreover, to have gone soft would be also to *trust* . Satsuki did not trust her implicitly. She knew not the strength of the woman's loyalty to Ryuu, but doubted in the event of a conflict that she could contest it. The princess felt a healthy bit of aversion toward the uncertainty.

If she was growing complacent, it was in inviting underlings whose obedience she could not assure. And she dealt not exclusively in *underlings*, anymore - Satsuki's standing on equal terms with the rough-edged but good-hearted Ryuu was tricky enough to navigate.

"By the way, what's a sandal-bearer do?"

"W… what?" Satsuki said, blinking.

"I know that waaaay back it was a super great honor, but what actually do I do? Mom and Dad and the whole village would always say if you agree to a job, you have to do it right, and I plan to! What're my responsibilities? Lay 'em on me! I'll be the best sandal-bearer you've ever had!"

Satsuki held up a hand. "You will accompany me to meetings and take my sandals when I go indoors. You may also serve as an attendant, and given your… unique skill set, I would expect you to behave inconspicuously as a bodyguard, if the need arose-,"

"Got it! You can count on me-!"

"And you *will not* interrupt me."

Mako smacked her hands over her mouth, eyes wide. Satsuki raised a brow.

"At ease, Mankanshoku."

A gulp of air. "I. Am. So. Sorry! I'll work on it, I swear! I won't interrupt Satsuki-hime-sama ever again - oh, Mako is in a pinch! I'm off to a questionable start on day one!"

Is it not minute one? Satsuki resisted the urge to massage her brow as the brunette ranted on. *It will all be worthwhile… This is nothing compared to the likes of what I've endured up to this point…*

A dog's bark sounded fairly nearby. It took Satsuki a moment to snap to alertness, rounding on the one-eyed beast that had spotted them and now stood by another abandoned building, tail wagging proudly. *If he's here-!*

The sunlight flickered as Ryuu descended, landing strongly on her feet near Satsuki and Mako.

"*You!* " Ryuu snapped, nearly jabbing a finger into Satsuki's chest as she leaned in her face. "What're you, off on a morning stroll? You know how much trouble I'll be in if you're caught wanderin' around here without me?!"

"Not as much trouble as *I'll* be in, I'm sure," Satsuki pointed out, a smart chill in her gaze. "I had no intentions of being caught, believe me. Don't spit and hiss at me because you were careless enough not to monitor me more closely-,"

Ryuu's hand lashed out; before Satsuki could escape, the short-haired woman had her by the neck of her robe, crossing her forearm above Satsuki's collarbone to brace a shove that drove her back into the wall of the shed.

The Kiryuuin gasped through parted teeth, hands fumbling about where they'd made for a failed attempt to grapple Ryuu in return. Ryuu was pinning her almost painfully to the wall, lip curled; but Satsuki's vision flickered. She shook her head, brushing off the disorientation.

"Bodyguard…?" she asked Mankanshoku dryly.

Mako was biting her lip uncertainly. "Ryuu-chan won't actually hurt you," she reasoned, apologetic.

"Oh, clearly…"

"I was careless?" Ryuu growled. "You really do piss me off! Yeah, maybe it was my mistake - to assume you wouldn't go around risking other people's necks without a second thought! If you had to go somewhere, would it have been that hard to wake me up?! I shoulda' known better!"

"Ryuuko-chan, that's enough!" Mako's voice said, while a dog's whine seemed to echo the sentiment. "She's not fighting back, and you're here now, so you won't get in trouble! You can go back together… huh?"

"Hey, Kiryuuin? H-hey!"

Satsuki blinked, lifting her head and refocusing on Ryuu's blue eyes in front of hers. "Matoi…?"

"Princess, you're not lookin' too good." The rough voice, suddenly wavering with concern.

"I'm fine," Satsuki said. When she brushed her fingers numbly over Ryuuko's forearm against her, the thief released her, backing off with a scowl. "I just need a minute to rest," she continued, still leaning heavily on the shed.

"You haven't slept?" Ryuu muttered, causing Satsuki to look up in surprise.

"How would you know?"

"Take a seat."

Satsuki held her glare, frowning.

"… Please, princess," Ryuu tried.

Satsuki let Mako help her to the ground. As soon as she was seated against the shed, Senketsu lay down at her side and shortly rested his head on her lap. She began to object, but he was warm and calm; he did not pester her for attention now. He only looked up at her with his single eye, evincing a willingness to move if unwelcome, while his tail flicked slightly side to side.

She rested a hand on his head, patting near his ears as his eye shut. His tail dusted the ground behind him, while the rest of his body remained still.

Strange beast… Satsuki thought, while Mako reached across her to pet the hound as well.

"Here." Ryuu was offering something folded in a napkin - a bar that looked to be baked full of seeds and nuts. "I filched some from the mess hall. If you've been sneaking around, you haven't eaten this morning, have you? And you ate in the evening, but you hardly got into any of your helping of gruel earlier yesterday, huh?"

"I don't require your concern," Satsuki said.

"You probably don't," Ryuu agreed, sitting down on Senketsu's other side. "Mako, have you eaten?"

A nod. "Mom packed me loads of her super power-up energy-packed mystery rations in case I had to leave the capital, so for a few weeks at least I'm all set!"

"That sounds… kinda dangerous?" Ryuu laughed, tearing the breakfast bar in half. "There you have it," she said, holding out a piece to the princess. "A concern-free offering of breakfast, if that'll make you feel better about getting some food in you."

Satsuki relented silently, taking the half and beginning to eat.

"Oh! Satsuki-hime-sama, may I take your sandals?" Mako asked, determination bright in her eyes.

"We are outdoors, Mankanshoku - there is no need."

She shook her head, hair bouncing as she did. "We did so much walking yesterday! I know just the thing, if you're tired and achy and stuff! I would do this for my folks all the time, after they worked all day on their feet."

"What…?" Ryuu asked, as Satsuki waved her on.

"I've acquired a sandal-bearer," the princess explained. Then she hissed, as Mako pressed her thumbs into the sole of a *tabi* sock.

"S-sorry!" the brunette yelped. "Was that too hard?"

"Start a bit softer… Yes, that much pressure will do," she said, watching the Darkstrider beam before refocusing on working her feet. Satsuki really was sorer than she had realized; and the Mankanshoku evidently had some experience with the way she gradually eased and rolled back some of the tension that had accrued.

"Mmn. Drink some water, too," Ryuu said around a dry mouthful, offering a flask. She paused, a peculiar look crossing her face when Satsuki's hand touched against hers.

"What is it?" the princess asked. "It *is* water, isn't it?"

"It is," Ryuu said with a chortle, handing it over. "You want 'unconcerned'? Consider this fine dining experience a couple marks off my debt - from the prisoner you smuggled rolls and water and meat to through the bars of her cell."

"That?" Satsuki scoffed lightly at the gesture. "Surely repaid, in freeing me from Junketsu."

"Was worth a shot," Ryuu said, folding up the napkin to stuff into a pocket. Done with her snack, she stood and stretched out her arms. "When you're done, let's get back to the lodge. Anyone asks, we'll

say we went out for a walk, which we *definitely* set out on together," she said, winking. "As if we didn't get enough time on our feet in the last couple days…"

"Ryuu… I'm not returning just yet."

"Huh? Where are we headed, then?"

"Not you - me. I am leaving the settlement; technically, you needn't worry about accompanying me then. Come with me to the edge if you'd like. I shall take Bakuzan off your hands, as well."

Ryuu frowned. "What are you up to? Actually, you're not in much shape for goin' *anywhere*, by the looks of it."

"I plan to help in the coming battle, my own way. Is that enough? Think, Ryuuko. We don't know how long Yaota plans to detain me here, with you as a watchdog. She doesn't trust me, and I'll be afforded no chances to win her trust. But keeping me from the battlefield, from the coming war, will waste lives that I may otherwise protect."

The thief shook her head. "You're talking crazy, Kiryuuin."

"Mankanshoku, my sandals," Satsuki requested. Mako set them before her, and the princess slid them on again, standing. Eye to eye with Ryuu, she raised her head.

"I won't pretend my odds of forcing my way past you just now are anything but bleak. No explanation seems forthcoming as to why Yaota seeks to keep me here - but if she cannot trust me enough to use my strength in battle, what use does a rebel army have for sheltering an exiled member of the despised royal family? My value to the revolution is the only token I can wager to defer judgment for my crimes. If the rebellion displays no interest in allowing me to express this value, I should certainly suspect of their intentions for me. Yaota will be contacting those above her, I take it - seeking to decide my fate."

"Your…?"

"If the queen is by some miracle overthrown in the coming months or years, the rebellion will have no desire to leave the Crown's loyalists and imperial court a legitimate heir to latch onto in her place."

"There's no way," Ryuu said. "The Sensei would protect you - *I'd* protect you. I mean…"

"The Sensei is a coordinator, not a commander; I know not yet the extent of his reach. I won't wager on whether, or how effectively, he would contest orders from the top brass. And you?" Satsuki smirked. "Do you wish to be forced into the position of making such a choice yourself - disobey the resistance, or help them put me down?"

Ryuu looked away, seething.

Satsuki stepped in front of her again. "We must act with all possible haste, Ryuuko. This is a battle to intercept the first strike of the Crown - to make the rebellion's power known, and show that we'll abide her tyranny no longer. Please understand. Even if the rebellion's resolution for me is not so heavy-handed, to keep me from the war for which I've spent my entire life preparing…"

"It'd be cruel. I get that," Ryuu said. She scratched her head, a grimace playing on her face. "Let's say you bolt - you go into hiding, plot to usurp the Crown when the dust settles, or turn against the rebellion outright. They won't be happy with me for letting you 'escape' from here on my watch."

"You can fly away from any troubles, right?" Satsuki said, almost teasing. She shook her head. "I *won't* disappear. As someone who peered into the window of my heart, you must know that."

"… I do," Ryuu admitted. "And I want to trust you - not because of that, but as a person, here and now."

"But…?" Satsuki said, feeling her hinging on something.

"I'll look after the sword," Ryuu said, gesturing to the Bakuzan on her back. "Until you come back."

"Ryuu…"

"Those are the terms," Ryuuko said. "I know you'll fight the queen, princess. But I don't want you running off to fight this war on your own. You'll come back for… for your fancy sword, won't you? Go ahead, then. Do what you have to do."

Satsuki nodded. "Very well. For the time being, I shall entrust the Bakuzan to my sword-bearer's care."

"Ooh!" Mako gushed. "Ryuuko-chan, now you have a title too!"

"H-hey! Don't go giving me appointments out of nowhere!" Ryuu snapped in complaint, but Satsuki only laughed. Ryuu softened, sighing. "Can't you tell us where you're going?"

"That's…"

"Secret?"

Satsuki held her ground. "I've made my plans; I go alone. Sir Uzu is fetching me a horse as we speak. For now, I…" Satsuki paused. "I'll ask you to extend your trust on it."

Ryuu snorted. "Fine," she said. "One last time."

"Then! Then!" Mako started. "Accompanying Satsuki-hime-sama is the job of her sandal-bearer, right?"

Satsuki was surprised. "You needn't trouble yourself, Mankanshoku. Wait with Ryuu for my return."

"Actually," Ryuu said, "that might not be a bad idea. You've got Junketsu to protect yourself, if you really need him…"

Satsuki's grip on her bag tightened, and Ryuu waved for her to calm.

"That crotchety old captain would want me skinned, if she found out I left you wandering around freely with *that*," Ryuu said, cringing. "But you still haven't recovered from wearing Junketsu before, have you? Mako can look out for you - probably help you keep from keeling over, too. Can't have you toppling off your horse in exhaustion."

"I've got plenty of mystery energy-bars for two!" Mako said, clapping her hands together before Satsuki could get in a word. "Whatever's wrong, I bet they'll fix you right up! And I'm kind of good at hunting, if we'll be crossing the wilds! I can help keep watch at night, and I can set traps! And if you need someone to carry your sandals at some point, I'm your gal! And foot rubs! Junketsu can't give foot rubs, can he? Of course not!"

"Alright," Satsuki said, recalculating. The Darkstrider was petite enough; the addition wouldn't overweigh a decent horse until they reached a town where they might acquire another. All in all, Satsuki did not foresee it slowing their travel by much. "I am in your care, Mankanshoku."

I really have gone mad, Satsuki thought to herself, massaging her brow as the younger woman squealed and threw up her hands, hugging Ryuu as an outlet for her joy. *A Darkstrider. A spy, a master of assassination, stealth, and deceit, whose powers I know not the full breadth of. I may be the most wanted person in the kingdom, and I'm bringing along an* assassin *I've only just met…*

But Ryuu trusted the Mankanshoku woman. Satsuki steeled herself to acknowledge that was something.

Looking up at the sound of hooves, Satsuki peered around an edge of the shed, and held up a hand when she sighted Sir Sanageyama on the approach. She spoke to the Darkstrider. "Are you ready to leave immediately?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Whoa!" Uzu said, drawing a dark-brown horse to a halt with a pull on the reins. "M'lady," he said, pulling down the hood of his cloak and giving a nod. "He's a jittery fellow, but the easiest one I could get to. Seems hardy enough… What's with the party?" he asked, swinging his leg over and coming to ground level in a smooth dismount. He jerked a thumb at Mako, Senketsu, and Ryuu. "They come to see you off?"

"From esteemed knight to horse-thief," Ryuu muttered snidely, earning a look.

"Ryuu and Mankanshoku are… doing their jobs, I suppose," Satsuki said, busy inspecting the tack and saddlebag as the horse snuffled and fidgeted idly. Satsuki would need to readjust to relying heavily on the reins, no doubt; few mounts answered a shift in weight as cleanly as the white warhorse Satsuki had trained herself. She wondered what would become of her mare, at the castle stables…

"Good work, Sanageyama," she said, appreciative. Climbing onto the saddle took more effort than she would have liked to admit, but in a moment she was seated. "Come along, then, sandal-bearer," she said, offering Mako her hand.

"Sandal-bearer?" Uzu echoed, shocked.

When Mako was securely behind her, arms around her waist, Satsuki bade the horse forward a few steps and halted again.

"Very well," Satsuki said, looking down at the thief, the knight, and the hound. "I will complete my task with all possible haste. If fighting breaks out before my return, I trust you can handle things on this end?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ryuu said, returning her smirk. "Take care of Mako, ya' hear?"

"Ryuu-chan! *I'm* supposed to be taking care of *her!* " the brunette whined, getting a laughing apology from the thief.

Satsuki nodded. "May the gods smile on our battlefields. Hyah!" she cried, and with a snap of the reins they were racing away, off for the nearby edge of town.

"You better come back soon!" Ryuu called. And then, softer: "Take care…"

May the gods smile… on whatever madness you're up to, Kiryuuin Satsuki.

~ ~

The Way Forward

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/87f7/f/2018/090/a/2/gama_outlaw_full_by_hinata0321-dc7ixc1.png]

End

Celebration of Prosperity

Chapter 20: Celebration of Prosperity

Heya, sorry for the delay! I'll try to get back on track from here.

In the spirit of mother's day, I think we can all be thankful that Ragyou is far away from Satsuki this chapter XD

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Twenty \ Celebration of Prosperity

"Our good citizens. We hope this summons finds you in fair health."

Queen Ragyou stood tall on the balcony overlooking the Square; the Founder's stone likeness towered behind her. The sovereign's horned and gem-studded crown, regal while wild with its crest of jutting spikes, rested comfortably over her brow. Curious noblesse populated the rows of seating to her sides, and a swamp of ants, having filed dutifully in from her summons, filled the square below to capacity. They now looked on, with speculation just barely edging through the emptiness in their eyes, as they took in the partly familiar scene and wondered glumly, anxiously, what this particular Celebration would entail.

Their eyes were drawn to the unusual - the variable in the setup before them. And like ants, few could help but let their attention linger on it, even when the queen spoke.

It had taken several large carts, piled high for multiple trips, to shuttle the gala's old food down the main road of Upper City and into the

plaza; the heap of copious excess that had been erected in the heart of the Square overflowed with the carnage of luxurious dishes and culinary wonders. Many were wholly untouched but for the ravages of the elements, insects, and the rampant progression of mold - the former contents of flawlessly arranged platters ruined, gathered belatedly from cracked floors or from trash heaps, mashed hurriedly into carts, and now mixed and tossed together with irreverence.

"As you may already be aware, our Radiant Founding Day gala was thrown into chaos. In a display of impudence crude as it were senseless, a terrorist *scheme* derailed our most wondrous celebration. Thankfully, none were harmed in the destruction that was wrought."

The prisoners who had been hauled down for the event, the several days worth of trespassers who had been caught rooting out what they might in the remains of the castle ballroom, were lined up between the crowd and the rotted mountain at the heart of the square, armed Enforcers at their backs. They had been told nothing; having grown more anxious by the minute since being plucked from their cells, they were meek and uneasy as the queen spoke. One man wrung his hands; another's head was bowed in prayer, his lips moving, his brow creased with panic despite his efforts. Pale, shaking - such was the state of them now. Nothing good ever became of the commoners hauled into the heart of the Square.

"Only the most extravagant fare is served at the kingdom's most illustrious party. Alas, what you see before you is the excess; it could not be enjoyed, with the event's untimely interruption."

The mass of commoners on ground level still predominantly gawked at the food heap, disgust in their eyes. Whether members of Middle City's relatively well-off, or the ones who struggled day in and day out to extend their existence, on a fundamental level they were sickened by the sight, the very *concept*, of such abundance and waste as the food pile encompassed.

The queen quirked a brow. "We could tell you that this all going to waste is the direct result of the flagrant attack concocted by my own daughter, the mad princess, in disrupting the festivities that had barely begun… but we will not. In the interest of dispelling any misconceptions you may suffer, we will implore you understand one thing - something many of you may find challenging to grasp."

Her somber look lightened, painted lips sprawling into a crimson smile.

"The amount of food we prepare for the Radiant Founding Day feast - selected with care from the finest ingredients, ordered by planners, collected from throughout our lands, consolidated in our kitchens, every bit sculpted into dishes most palatable by chefs of the utmost expertise, cooked to perfection and plated in the most aesthetically pleasing manners, before at last being bestowed upon our ballroom tables in meticulously planned arrangements… The amount is more than the guests in attendance could ever care to consume. We may suppose it is chosen in excess of what three, or five, or ten times as many guests could consume, even if those guests were to arrive ravenous."

She saw a wave of dread ripple languidly through the crowd, saw the creeping onset of the madness she courted as their brains struggled to make sense of what they were told.

"For what reason, you may ask, would we each and every year demand the investment of rin, resources, energy and labor, to prepare a quantity of food of which our guests will barely scrape the surface?"

She saw they were restless; the ants far below her stirred, their discomfort palpable. The queen raised her head.

"We do so because we *can* . Look again upon that tower of waste. On the anniversary of this kingdom's founding, there is nary more fitting a demonstration of the magnitude of the difference between

you, who starve, and we, who rule, than the sheer amount *we* are able to demand, to procure, to process, and to *discard* ."

The aura about them all but sparked with danger - the warning of humans near to breaking, hinging between hope and despair. However they were degraded, whatever the atrocities that were committed upon them, they could still overlook the horror of all that had been said; they would force themselves to accept the queen's insults with a smile, if she might either in kindness or convenience allow them to scavenge the days-old remains of the feast, even as an afterthought.

"Look, we say, upon a mere shred of the wealth the kingdom can produce, and none of it to fill your plates! This is the sort of wealth your queen alone can command at single thought."

They would submit to any humiliation, and take shamelessly what they were given. It was a lovely, putrid manner of living; it simultaneously delighted and repulsed the monarch in fine robes. She did so wonder, if she were to unleash them at once to grab from the heap whatever moldy refuse they pleased, whether the more desperate among them might tear each other to pieces. But the musing was brief.

She spread her arms, raised hands laden with jeweled bangles and rings. "We have the power to *throw away* a hundred times more than those of your rude station, grasping inelegantly for survival, could even imagine upon your tables! Yes - to throw away, for scraps that so much as grow cold, that are no longer fit for our plates, simply must in some manner be disposed of."

She had them, gleaming eyes drinking in the tumult of minds wound up tight, as they hung on her every word.

"It might almost be fit for the bowls, then, of the working hounds of the castle - but nay, they deserve better fare, and our old food may prove too rich for the beasts' consumption! Perhaps it could go to the feed troughs of pigs - but to use garbage to nurture that which we

will ultimately consume would be obscene in its own right. In any case, to so utilize waste is to suggest it is in some way needed or valued, and it is not; our pigs are easily supplied all the feed they require. By what means, then, may we dispose of excess?"

She shut her eyes, as if in thought; the opulent folding fan she carried rested by her face as she looked down at them again. "Then came this suggestion - that we hand it out to *urchins* depraved enough to prove desirous of our trash!"

They would accept it. If she offered it to them now, on the heels of such thorough slander, still they would accept it. The grotesque beauty of the common masses filled her heart with mirth.

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/1ea4/f/2018/133/5/0/ragyoufull_by_hinata0321-dcbh47n.png]

A laugh, regal and shrill. "Piteous, immature souls." Her voice lowered, and she spoke slowly, that the disgust behind each word could set in. "We would as soon elect for the fattening of pestilent maggots and *worms*, or fret after the wellbeing of rats infesting a sewer. You would ask us to nourish and cultivate an assortment of weeds and fungal mold with the same love and dedication with which we tend exotic gardens. The act *itself* would render our hands tainted."

The air hung quiet and still. But on desolate faces, in innumerable hearts, something so carefully teased out and coiled tight began to fray, to snap.

Queen Ragyou's face was loftily smug, her smile patronizing to no end. "Most would argue that the common-blooded should never be exposed to such matters - the truth is too far elevated, the logic too sophisticated, to elicit your appreciation. But we come to find ourselves in disagreement to such tired tradition!" she trilled, continuing grandiosely as cries and wails began to emerge from the crowd, and Enforcers shouted for their silence.

Her slender arms were upraised, trailing pale cloth from her glimmering dress's sleeves. "You deserve to know, to be taught, to *comprehend* firsthand what makes us who we are! We *delight* in the prospect of enabling you to share in the revelry of this enlightenment. Rejoice, hideous, weary souls! Your struggle is not blameless but preordained, by the indifferent command of gods who could spare you no ounce of favor! For what else could create so vast a divide as we see between yourselves and I! Embrace the liberation of your own powerlessness, and rejoice in the comedy of your worthless existence! Rejoice, I say! *Rejoice!* "

Yells of protest, wails of despair, were drowned in the warning roars of Enforcers, some of whom stormed into the crowd. The masses parted where they shoved through; at least a few, singled out for misbehavior, were toppled by Stun spells or the crack of canes.

Some shrank back at the sight.

Some shouted at the Enforcers, shouted back at their warnings, eyes teeming with rage.

Noblesse in their elevated seating looked on uneasily, at the less-than-obsequious masses.

"And what of the prisoners at the heart of the plaza, who dared to wade into our trash? They must now strive toward comprehension in the error of their ways, and the slight that has been dealt by their immoral, covetous deeds. They shall receive an opportunity to atone for their lowly greed, their lack of restraint! Hear now their sentence!!" she boomed, commanding the arena's attention again.

"The heap will be strewn with oil; the swine shall then eat whatever morsels are placed before them until they are sated, and then *continue* to eat until they can eat no longer. If they refuse, they will be forced. Once I deem them all to have undergone adequate suffering, they shall be rewarded with merciful death! They shall be drenched in oil, thrown on the heap, and *burned*, along with the

garbage they partook in! So we shall enshrine and immolate the scum most fittingly with its obscene desires!"

The prisoners were crying, or looking on with bleak expressions, as Enforcers began to coerce them roughly to their feet by hands bound behind their backs. Servants were towing vats of oil in rope-drawn carts from one of the entry tunnels. A man in the crowd was shouting at an Enforcer, pointing, while the lawman brandished his cane, yelling back.

Ragyou saw the precise moment it occurred - that many of the commoners' number pieced together her words, and their eyes fell on the vats of oil being wheeled into the plaza.

She was amused to find it was not with the announcement of the impending torture, but the confirmation of intent to waste the food heap entirely, that they snapped.

Pandemonium.

It started, perhaps, with the Enforcer finally drawing back his cane and cracking his yelling opponent over the head. In quick succession, another man rammed into the Enforcer, blindsiding him, and a swarm of commoners fell upon him, dragging him to the ground, beating and tearing with viciousness in their hearts.

Other Enforcers, caught in their shock between restoring order and turning tail, were rushed and similarly engulfed, brought down as they ran. Some of the commoners had knives - the adept ones cutthroats and thieves, no doubt. Most simply attacked with their fists. A cane was ripped from a lawman's hand, turned against him with furious relish.

Hordes piled against the sides of and overturned the carts with the heavy oil kegs, learning the titanic strength in their numbers as they swept forward. Some grabbed the prisoners, fleeing with them; many in the crowd had immediately run, shoving to escape the scene from the moment the violence had kicked off. But multitudes surged on

past the carts, past the toppled Enforcers, and rushed to grab armfuls from the food pile before they turned to flee.

Hououmaru Rei's mouth was a flat line as she watched from the queen's side. The rioters were shouting - few could coherently be picked out, but some more impassioned made it through, as voices joined together. 'Burn the mad queen.' She winced to the slightest degree. "Your Majesty, what have you done…?" But she faltered, at the low issuing of a laugh.

"Look, Hououmaru - how they scurry like ants."

A Scorch mage's fireball struck an overturned cart, flashing over the spill and blowing back rioters in a bursting billow of blinding, sweltering flame. Ravage mages unleashed their powers without even leaving the relative safety of the noblesse seating, raining death on the disorderly crowd.

Blossomed into a minute of immaculate chaos, and in a half-minute more, routed. Mages and archers fired after fleeing stragglers, sneering in scorn, making a game of racking up kills.

"And as quickly, they scatter…"

The plaza was aflame, the food heap partially disturbed but too massive to have fully lost form. Charred bodies were strewn on the cobblestones, some clutching food, most with their backs turned on the Upper City side of the arena.

Ragyou's only regret was that her Satsuki was not here to have silenced the protestors herself. How she would have loved to see that wretched, righteous girl of hers made to exert Junketsu's overwhelming power, to slaughter on command.

"How…" Hououmaru considered her words. "My queen, for a Celebration to be ruined in such a fashion… How will you mete out punishment?" Middle City's inhabitants had fled, no doubt running mindlessly back to their homes; by and large, even most of the

rioters had escaped, turning tail when they saw their numbers dashed by the mages' spells.

"No need," Ragyou said. "They remember themselves. They will stew on this, mourn those they have lost, and behave impeccably for the coming Celebrations on the horizon - of this I have no doubt." She turned, retreating from the balcony in gliding steps. "Be a dear and convey my orders, would you? Dispatch a few teams of spearmen for the Square's cleanup. Be sure to tell them to check every common-blooded corpse with a good thrust; surely some play dead. We don't want people getting hurt."

"At once, my queen."

"Have the waste properly drenched and burned with the corpses. Dismiss the last few battlemages only then, that they may strike down any with the insanity to attempt to steal now."

A soft laugh. As far as Hououmaru was concerned, if her queen was in high spirits, all was well. "The noble mages do often huff, for being assigned tasks as mere soldiers."

"Huff as they might, but look at them, Hououmaru - we need hardly order them to stay. Animals are more easily ruled than men. I have great faith in my people's desire to exert their privilege… certainly more than I have in their loyalty to queens or kings." She vanished into the shadows of a stair, voice drifting back. "My people understand me. They stand guard of their own volition, thirsting vigilantly for blood."

The queen's favorite turned briefly, eyes sweeping the mostly-evacuated noblesse stands. Mostly, but for a key few dozen; more than required, all in all. A ghost of a laugh left her, and she continued with the queen into the stairwell.

"So they do."

That night the stones of the Square were charred. The city skyline was colored with the light of flames on billowing, oily black smoke as the heap of food waste was made a pyre, and burned until ash and bone remained.

"You ready yet, boy?" the blacksmith asked as he came through the doorway, hand clapping down to ruffle the forlorn teen's sandy hair. "It's sooner than we expected, but we won't get much better a time than a Celebration to skip town." No one around, no one to see. They were lucky they had already gathered supplies from around town.

"I know!" the younger thief said, picking up his head and waving Tsumugu's arm away. Yoriyoshi looked at the shoulder bag he'd packed, frowning. "This town's a crapsack. But it's still…"

"It's home - I get that, kid. And if a guild full of dirty thieves is a better family than you came from, I get that too. Remember what I said? We're doin' this because we care about this crapsack place 'nuff to wanna make it better." The guild couldn't arm a resistance in the capital itself - at present, they lacked the means of fighting here. But from the outside… "The others will keep an eye on things here. So-,"

Tsumugu hushed suddenly, listening. Moments later a knock came banging from the front door.

"Open up! We know you're in there!"

"The Holy mages," Tsumugu grumbled under his breath, already grabbing the boy's shoulder bag and slinging it, and his own travel bag, into a closet. He gave Yoriyoshi a push toward his cot, and the apprentice thief hopped smoothly into bed, depositing his glasses and pulling the sheet up over his work clothes. Hoping the Detect Life spell that had found them wasn't precise enough to have shown they'd been standing up talking, Tsumugu shut the door of the spare room and hurried to the front. It was their rotten luck that the random checks had come over this part of town, and his blacksmith's shop.

"You have three seconds to open up-!"

The lawman shut his mouth as Tsumugu undid the lock and opened the door a crack, offering a meek, dull expression. He'd chosen his posture to downplay any threat that may have been seen in his muscular build, as the Sensei had taught him, and surveyed his guests - a calm-looking, fair-haired Holy mage in a hooded robe, standing back from two Enforcers who crowded the door - with a shy flicker of his eyes, and a nod of greeting. He furrowed his brow.

"G-g'day," he said in a quavering voice, and ducked his head - the spitting image of a scared commoner who knew his place well. Harmless. "Please, my brother is ill… If you could, mayhap, just try not to shout-,"

"Attending the Celebration isn't optional. Do you think you're a nobleman, who can drop in at his leisure? The queen calls on you rats, you assemble!" It was the lawman who'd been knocking who spoke, making a point of refusing to lower his voice as he jabbed his cane into the larger man's chest. He pushed through the doorway as the shrinking commoner, stuttering apologies, faltered back.

Tsumugu stole a glance at the others, whose attention was broken by something outside. Upper City - they were looking in the direction of the Square, one saying the noise wasn't like the usual.

Another jab to his chest, with some force behind it, and Tsumugu offered a whimper as the lawman followed him into the entryway. "If your brother's so sick, carry him there, you useless lug! You spend so long pounding metal each day, your empty skull couldn't cobble together a way to solve such a simple problem? Or did you think you wouldn't be caught skipping out?! You ought to know what a serious offense this is!"

The blacksmith was beginning to blubber a response when a far-off boom reached their ears.

Tsumugu saw the lawman's attention stray from his cowering form. He wasn't considered a threat enough to demand his gaze.

He ducked aside the moment the Enforcer's eyes left him, kicking the door shut. He intercepted a swing of the surprised lawman's cane by grabbing his arm, throwing him against the opening door hard enough to bounce it shut as the ones outside tried to kick it in.

Tsumugu kept the cane as he slung the dazed lawman to one side of the door, and slipped away on the other. The door burst open again, this time swinging around into the adjacent wall. The man who rushed inside looked immediately toward the downed lawman, after the noise of his fall - and received Tsumugu's swing with a crack, the cane splintering over the back of his skull.

The Holy mage fired on the snarling blacksmith through the doorway, a flare of white light searing from his hand. Tsumugu shielded his eyes as the spell began to burn at his skin - and the mage cried out, interrupted. Tsumugu's vision cleared on the sight of the white-robed figure recoiling from a slender projectile in his arm. The distraction was enough for the blacksmith to spring forward through the doorway, delivering a wicked hook that knocked the mage flat on his back.

"Nice work with that needle-spitter of yours," Tsumugu grumbled, inspecting his arm briefly as Yoriyoshi came up to him from the side of the shop. His skin tingled where the light had touched him, but the spell hadn't had time to eat through, but for leaving a few patches of red, lined thinly with blood. "You hopped out the window, or what?"

"It's a crossbow and you know it!" the boy complained, though his face was pale from the excitement. "Just because it's a compact one doesn't make it any less!"

"Yeah, yeah," Tsumugu said, clapping his hand on his head again to shut him up. "I *said* it was a nice shot. Or did you not hear me?"

"Th-thank you, sir. I try."

"That's better. Run inside and get our bags," he said, and turned back to the mage groaning on the ground. The slender fellow spat, choking and sending droplets of blood from his nose and mouth.

"Sounds like quite some commotion up at the Celebration, huh?" Tsumugu muttered, patting him down. He immediately tore the coinpurse from his belt, testing its weight curiously, and pocketed it before digging an ivory bag from a pouch of his robe. A peek inside showed him an expensive-looking tobacco kit, complete with a well-crafted pipe and a bag of magefire pellets for lighting it. The burly thief whistled approvingly, popping the lid of a mostly-full tin of tobacco flakes. "And for the time being, my loot is all mine…"

"G-gang rat!" the mage growled, still too weak or dazed to rise as Tsumugu packed the pipe's bowl with a practiced thumb.

"It's a guild, not a gang," he pointed out, sizing up a magefire bead that looked tiny in his hand. "How's this bit work… Ah, there we have it," he said, feeling it heat up when he pushed some energy into it in a closed palm. He dropped it into the chamber, less than impressed; it sparked and vaporized, sending a miniscule ringlet wave of flame crackling out through the flakes. Sarden convenient, he couldn't deny, but it still rubbed him the wrong way. He took a smooth draught from the stem, swirling the smoke in his mouth, and let it out in a sigh. "Quite the blend. This is what they smoke in Upper City, huh? What kind is it?"

The mage on the ground was still cursing at him, trying to stymie the blood flow from his broken nose. "The queen will have you miscreants strung up and flayed! You won't be laughing when-!"

"I have two useful pieces of information for you," the standing man said, letting go another puff of smoke. He nudged the mage with his boot, turning him onto his back. "First - I *detest* mages, magical items, and magical creatures."

The mage whimpered as he met the blacksmith's glare, and the fire in his eyes.

"Second - these aren't your streets, and they're not your bloody queen's streets, either. They're ours. We'll be back for them, soon."

He raised his foot and stomped, his work boot meeting the mage's face with a heavy crunch.

"Y- you killed him! Bloody heck!"

"Don't sneak up on me, Yoriyoshi!" he snapped, but took his bag to sling over a shoulder. The frazzled youth offered Tsumugu's flat tweed cap, which he took and put on, pulling the brim low. "He'll recover, probably. He'll just look a mite different than he used to…" He scowled. *Depending on how fast Replenish mages get to him.*

"I got some spare coin off the ones inside."

"Good. Let's get a move on while it's still quiet… Hm?"

In the distance, before the towering statue of the Founder that rose just above the Middle City skyline… smoke was drifting into the sky. And there was quite a bit of noise echoing on the air, growing closer.

People were flocking back into town, pouring down the main streets and ducking into their homes. Speeding trickles of traffic branched off onto side roads and alleys, but as the pair of thieves came to a central road, they saw clearly an ongoing exodus from the direction of the Square, of Middle City folks whose eyes were wide and dark on faces stark with horror.

Tsumugu swore in wonder. "We go now," he grunted, grabbing the kid's arm. "Side streets."

He knew not what had taken place, but their flight from the city went without incident, in the resulting chaos. They ran from the walls, from the capital, and into the countryside, putting ground behind them until the boy was wheezing for rest.

The blacksmith crawled back up the hill, eyes sweeping the horizon on which the city lay. Black smoke towered above it in the sunset. He frowned, but was content to spot no pursuers or scouts, as of yet. He returned to where Yoriyoshi sat at the base of the hill, drinking water between panting breaths.

"Amazing. It went without a hitch… Now we just need to get a hold of some horses." He even had the savings on hand to do so lawfully, if required.

Yoriyoshi smirked, reflective. "And then we can see the Sensei, and Miss Ryuu, and Senketsu again…"

"Soon," Tsumugu said with a scowl. He could hardly stand them, personally - even the often carefree Sensei he owed so much seemed to delight in aggravating him at will. But hell if they weren't the first lunatics he'd pick to fight alongside, given the choice.

He surrendered a gruff smile as he took his own water swig, shaking his head. "Soon."

The short-haired woman looked up from the tree limb on which she sat, elbows propped on the Tenkantsuujou across her lap. The moon was bright, turning the treetops that stretched out around her a soft blue.

The rebels from Yaota's settlement had joined up with another company earlier in the day; they approached the Crown's prisoner convoy, set to intercept them a safe distance from the capital. The army rested now, but it wouldn't be long before the fighting began.

And Ryuu, to fight with them. To be their very own dragon on the front lines. Still she grimaced at the thought of herself on a battlefield.

"How'd a city thief wind up here?" she muttered, wry. How'd a hermit's kid born in the woods become a street-smart thief, at that?

The weight of your name said you'd wind up here, a part of her offered up. *Sooner or later, like it or not…* The divines willed it, right? She scowled, realizing she'd pressed a hand to the nape of her neck.

She was here because she'd decided to be. Nothing more, nothing less. But still her hands shook.

Ryuu was bound for the first battle in a war the ruddy princess wanted nothing *more* than to fight. 'The queen must be stopped' - that was probably what she would have said. For the rogue Junpakko, it was simple as that.

She'll be there, too, Ryuu reminded herself, staunchly pushing away her doubt. *All I've got to do is look after things until she arrives. Piece of cake…*

She should rest, she knew. She tipped from the branch with a sigh, slipping down toward the dimly lit tents of the campsite sprawled below.

"You should rest."

"I told you, Mankanshoku-,"

"Even if it's just for a bit, while we give the horses a break, you should try to sleep. You - you don't look well."

Satsuki eyed the brunette who knelt beside her in the near-darkness of the clearing; the younger woman had gladly taken responsibility for tending to both their horses, so that Satsuki could sit and stretch. "What's this?" Satsuki asked, nodding toward the item in the Darkstrider's hands.

"Tie me up, if you don't trust me," she said, stifling the hurt in her eyes. She frowned, determined, and held out the roll of rope. "Just

leave my mouth uncovered - I'll keep watch, and I'll shout if I hear anything, so you can nap easy, and then…"

Satsuki-hime put a hand on her shoulder, gripping gently. She smiled, but shook her head. "It's not because of you that I can't sleep. I promise, that's not it."

Mako's lip trembled. "Hime-sama…"

"I'll be fine. You may rest, if you wish."

The Darkstrider lay down on her bedroll eventually, but despite her shut eyes, Satsuki could tell she did not manage to sleep. A Darkstrider, sick with worry… The princess tipped her head back, weary gaze drifting to the moon and stars.

For just a bit longer… I'll be fine. She would do what she needed to do.

~ ~

Celebration of Prosperity

End

Vanguard

Chapter 21: Vanguard

I hope you enjoy the chapter!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Twenty-One \ Vanguard

"That's more Crown-rats than we expected, I take it."

"Did you hear a request for commentary, *ryuu* ?" Yaota asked, a warning in her tone. "You're only here because if the princess *you* let slip away chooses to move against us now, you're all we've got to stop her."

"She turns bad and I'm your only hope, huh? What a lovely way you have of telling someone how much you're counting on them," Ryuu muttered from where she crouched. Mikisugi lowered his binoculars and touched a hand on her shoulder, urging her to let it go.

"Excuse me?" the dark-haired captain was saying with a scoff. "I'd much rather be assured as to the whereabouts of the kingdom's most wanted woman, thank you. As well as knowing the person I must depend on is a *reliable* one - yes, wouldn't that be swell?"

Ryuu scowled, musing that Yaota and the princess could probably make peachy good friends, circumstances booted under a rug. But after trekking out to confirm some frantic scouts' hushed report with their own eyes, she couldn't fault the captain her harsh disposition.

The thief leaned on her elbow, tapping a foot behind where she lay, and peered sidelong into the valley again. The heat of the woods suffused mists that lingered from recent rain; these elements elicited a cloying, resinous tang from the patchwork of spruces and cedars that towered proudly between the occasional sprawling, gnarled live oak. The warmth refreshing, if a mite too humid even for Ryuu's taste. The trees reeked like they could have been panting - or suffocating - in the clammy heat, if they hadn't already proved themselves indifferent enough to root down in the clay mud beneath them.

The sweeping descent from the mountainside was largely barren, leveling off into a field - a wide, shallow stretch of puddles and mud, where at this distance the few browned grasses and dingy weeds to take up habitation clung to transient foundations like tufts of unkempt, scraggly fur. Beams of sunlight filtered through curtains of mist, and the profiles of washed-out mountains loomed, fading with distance, on the horizon. In the field between the scouts' location and those far-off, true peaks, a curving sliver of hard-packed road alone drew a clean-shaven stripe through the otherwise randomly distributed, if sparse, vegetation. The ranks of the army tromping through followed, but stood many times too wide to be contained by the highway that snaked toward the capital, even though the presence of humans and carts for scale let Ryuu gauge it sizeable.

"… But it *is* more troops than anticipated, isn't it? I ain't the quickest at estimating numbers, but-,"

"*Yes*," Mikisugi said tersely, bumping the binoculars lightly over the back of her skull. The older thief's expression was uncharacteristically grim as he studied the columns of soldiers trudging languidly on. It wasn't like him to stew. But he'd spoken little, and his face was coldly taut. "A good deal more."

The party went unnoticed and unsuspected, hidden with a few other scouts in the shadow of trees that crowded up to the edge of the mountainside ridge. But a regiment swarmed the corridor they eyed, its ranks dotted with proudly flown silver and white banners of the

Crown. Footsoldiers and cavalrymen made for the bulk of the force, but unmistakable among them were squads of robed battlemages traveling on horseback. Distributed about the army were at least a dozen heavily-armored riders, and as many squires, decorated in the regalia of the Queen's Own; the knights loosely chaperoned eight carts loaded with bound and blindfolded prisoners, located securely at the formation's heart.

"Some forty in chains," Mikisugi said with a scowl. "But the numbers here tell of the many more to fall, when their base was routed. The force of the ambush would have been overwhelming; I doubt the Crown has many losses to show for their trouble…"

Ryuu's frown deepened. The brute numbers were concerning enough; the rebel forces in the area that had come together for this operation were hundreds shy of the procession that sliced through the plain below. The Crown army was undeniably superior in composition, as well - hosting a diversity of trained warmages, knights, and artillerymen, every one of them well-equipped. Even the common Crown soldiers would be a cut above in training, and their uniform armor far outclassed the average of the hodgepodge outfitting Yaota's troops.

The thief hated to admit it, but she would have felt better about the odds of success had Satsuki-hime been surveying the enemy here with them.

The princess can't activate Junketsu now, she reminded herself; last she'd seen, Satsuki had yet to recuperate from the strain of donning Junketsu before.

But the Kiryuuin was a force in and of herself. Ryuuko considered the army again, and ground her teeth. Godplate or no godplate, she'd feel better with the princess here. Ryuu could understand it - how the Kiryuuin, with her commanding spirit, made her soldiers believe defeat was impossible. Her judgment was shrewd. If victory were impossible, she wouldn't be fighting to begin with.

The thief wondered, briefly as the nagging thoughts would allow, what Satsuki-hime would have made of the battle Ryuu clumsily scoped out. Ryuu, a halfdragon whose military expertise was nonexistent. She tried not to chew her lip as, with a nod to the scouts who stayed put, she followed as Mikisugi and Yaota retreated from the ridge. Back through the woods, toward the encampment of rebel troops.

Wondering won't do me much good now…

"Captain," Ryuu tried, earning a dour look. She wrestled down an impulse to glare back as she toed her way past tree roots, trudging through the undergrowth and treacherous muck. "The Princess's elites, and me - you've got to let us fight."

"No one is fighting," Yaota said stonily, looking away. "I send in my forces, we'll have a bloodbath on our hands before we so much as touch one of those carts. Our survivors would be no more than extra bodies for whatever Celebration the queen has in store for the ones we sought to save. Even if we could take down as many as we are strong, the effort is fruitless; we'll win no war of attrition with the Crown."

Ryuu saw the Sensei nod reluctantly, morose. She chewed on her lip. "That's reasonable," she admitted at last. "You can't count on turning the tides with a handful of hardy mooks you barely even trust. I get that."

"I'm glad we're in agreement. Now if you'd hold the chatter-,"

"They get much closer to the capital, and no one's making any rescue attempts without drawing even more Crown reinforcements; our chances don't get any better from here. This is where you sign the death warrants on those forty poor sods. So if a rogue unit were to run off and do its best to help them, it wouldn't be at fault if any turned out getting hurt, would it?"

The captain finally sent her a serious look. "What are you plotting?"

"I'm not much for plotting," Ryuu said meekly, though her shrug was sly. "That said, I'd hope if a handful of veritable monsters were to head up a good charge against the troops down there, and raise some hell… If that hypothetically happened, at least, I'd hope the commander of a nearby rebel army wouldn't miss the opportunity to get her troops in position, and back them up."

"Ryuuko!" Mikisugi warned.

"You would ask me to sacrifice my soldiers," Yaota laughed. "You, an urchin who's never seen a battlefield!"

"This urchin's got fangs," Ryuu reminded her, flashing her teeth as she backed cautiously away. "All I ask is that you charge if it looked like it *wouldn't* make for a mass sacrifice. We'll see if we can't make an opening you can act on in good conscience, Cap'n."

Without waiting for an answer she bent her knees and sprang - bouncing from one tall, straight tree trunk to another, and with a few more moves alighting smoothly in a crouch on a branch twenty meters overhead. Yaota had watched her departure in disconcerted bafflement, but considered her as she slowed.

"Ryuu!" the Sensei hissed from below. "I can't dissuade you from doing something crazy, but you know what I'm going to say."

The halfling looked down. "Don't die? Can't say I plan to."

The sensei nodded begrudgingly, waving her on with a sigh. The younger thief leapt away, vanishing amid the dull-green weave of the forest.

"Bloody pathetic, it is," Sir Uzu was saying, hood pulled low over his brow. His lips almost pursed in disdain as he patted the sheath lashed to his hip. "*Iron.* I haven't gone to battle with iron in hand since I was a boy leading a plucky band of skirmishers through the

countryside. I simply hope this piece of junk shan't break in a few swings…"

"Perhaps a change in perspective would behoove you," Gamagoori suggested stonily, patience frayed thin as they squelched up the road. Even here where it lay more firmly packed, the ground wheezed gently at their steps, grey mud clamoring up with a tireless grip about the boots that fell. "*Embrace* the handicap of arms as poor as you excelled with among your brigands. If your swordsmanship has grown sloppy enough *since* to wear out average-quality weapons with undue haste, I should like to say Satsuki-hime and Junketsu did you a favor in shattering your favorite. Reinstate your discipline from the ground up."

"Or try out the Bakuzan," Ryuu offered, to Gamagoori's annoyance. She jerked a thumb at the sheathed greatsword slung across her back. "Legendary or whatever, a sword's a sword. Gods know I don't need it."

Sir Uzu gave an affronted scowl. "Short of a direct order from the princess, I would not dare to wield her sword. She bequeathed it to you, so you shall be the one to look after it."

"You're lousy with greatswords, either way," Gamagoori pointed out, eliciting a gripe from the green-haired man.

"Can't be any fouler hands for a sword than mine." Ryuu snorted as she turned, eyes forward again. *Even the ruffian knight straightens up quick, when it comes to their Junpakko…*

Ryuu's hand clenched on her more familiar Tenkantsuujou. The first rows of silvered helmets and blades cropped up in the distance, sunlight dusting icily atop the sea of steel that sliced through the mud-darkened plain. "I can see them."

"And there's the advance squad coming out to greet us," the part-giant remarked, nodding as a few riders broke from the distant, looming wall's front edge. Clumped dirt sprayed behind sturdy

hooves as they neared at a gallop, though the sodden earth held fast against dust.

"Never seen a battlefield before, have you, thief? Sorry - Miss Ryuu, that is."

"When would I have?" Ryuu answered the knight, gaze still fixed on the squad that approached. "Don't mind me - I've experienced my share of putting hired thugs and noblesse guards out of commission. Even knocked quite a few Crown goons' teeth in, when I was out to nab your lady's sword."

"Never laid eyes on a battlefield, and she proposed this lunacy." Sanageyama chuckled all the same, bumping his hand over Gamagoori's shoulder. "The dragon thief's got quite the sack on her."

"Why's it always have to be about balls?" Ryuu said, exasperated. She wiped bangs and sweat from her eyes, tucking her crimson streak aside. "Your princess asked me to help in her place. I'll see what I can do. That's all."

"I trust your combat sense in a duel," Sanageyama went on. The hoofbeats continued to louden. "But on a battlefield, I don't think you're up to filling those shoes. To be fair, there may be no one who is…"

"The shoes don't need to be full," Gamagoori said, waves of Augment arcana lighting suddenly upon his skin. Currents of a Fortify spell rippled sturdily upon the surface and hood of his cloak, audibly setting themselves in hovering, crystalline patterns before they seeped into his skin; his hair flared and stood on end, as if charged. "We will make what difference we are able, and fight."

"You three! Halt-!"

He moved without warning, deep ruts opening the mud where he'd stood. His sizable form surged twenty meters on with incredible strength, a shield drawing back on his arm. He swung in time to

greet the trio of riders - with a brutish *CRACK* sending the blindsided men, and mounts, sailing clear of the road in the direction of the swing.

Gamagoori landed with a strong thud of weight, lurching to a halt; he heaved and poised the red-smattered greatshield above him, angled toward the army, and coiled his legs as he steadied its solid weight to a halt.

Ryuu had discarded her cloak before alighting on the improvised platform, feet squared on its surface as she sank to crouch. She sprang in concert with the bellowing part-giant's momentous shove, hurtling skyward in a flash of black and red.

The army spread out rapidly beneath a bird's-eye view; the sheer expanse of white-clad, steel-armored figures sent a quick jolt skittering through her heart. Then she refocused, and her eyes narrowed on the procession of carts, nestled in the rear-center of the army, as she neared the top of her arc. There was her goal.

She turned gracefully in the air and dived, teeth clenched against the thrilling, battering rush of chill wind. The army's immensity truly engulfed her view as she drew near, and the level of detail fragmented rapidly into stunned expressions and soldiers who pointed, sleepy and bored faces that snapped awake with surprise, mages who began to channel and archers who fumbled for their bows. But in moments she was striking down as a humanoid missile - her new boots smashing clear through the edge of a cart and its front wheels' axle below, as its driver staggered away.

She raised her head from her crouch, wood splinters scattering around the wreckage of her landing. The startled pair of horses that had been hauling the cart whinnied and fled, their end of the broken hitch dragging wildly behind them.

"Get down!" Ryuu barked to confused prisoners, leaping away as a spearman came lunging for her. She was high in the air as she dug

in her robe and swept out her arms, flinging a few thimble-sized glass vials to either side.

She had dropped down first on the frontmost cart, and now sailed toward the one behind it; she curved her body to narrowly escape a beam of Shock that lanced from a nearby mage's hands, and swatted her staff through a disc of Frost that was coming in on-target. She rolled in the air and drew her staff as far back as both arms would take it, her toes pointing up behind her arching back, and snapped the staff sharply down in her landing, with a roar - smashing the second cart's hitch in an angry scattering of wood, a scowl on her face.

We won't lose a chunk of soldiers in an all-out battle… if we can scatter you enough for Yaota's army to drive you back, and make you leave your captives behind!

When they landed, the vials she'd thrown scattered webs of potent, coiling magic that ruptured after they clung, evidenced by thundering bursts of Rend that tossed nearby Crown soldiers and sprays of damp earth high into the air. Horses nearest to the explosions reared and kicked in spite of their training, unsteadied by the sudden noise.

The third cart was veering to the side, its driver trying to steer it away. Ryuu jammed an end of the Tenkantsuujou into a cart wheel behind her and leapt as she bade it extend - propelling herself forward just above the ground. Without the slow, high arc of a leap, she was upon them quickly enough to meet the cart driver with both feet, throwing him from his seat. Landing on the other side of the cart with him, she shot her staff out again just moments after it had whirred and zipped down to size - now snaring a front wheel's spokes so that it shortly tore itself from the runaway cart's axle with a metallic scream.

She leapt away before rushing soldiers might close in on her position. The fourth cart was stationary, guarded already by a swarming surge of them who'd anticipated her destination; as she began to fall she lanced the Tenkantsuujou down with a scowl, jolting

as it caught the earth. The bending staff straightened again as it continued to extend, flicking her skyward - past the fourth cart, and onto the considerably less-prepared fifth, which she put out of commission with another wicked swing of her staff. Her arms rattled at the force, and her legs burned from stringing together so many superhuman leaps, but excitement sizzled in her veins; her grin couldn't have been sharper.

The cart she'd skipped over was less prepared when she returned to it. The soldiers gathered on the side of her approach boasted a barrier of blades and spears until she sailed over their heads, landing on the opposite side - and the moment she touched down she snapped back toward them in a curt second leap. They rounded just in time to see her spinning to face away as she flew, a glint in her eye and a smirk baring her teeth.

[DRAGON'S TAIL]

The soldiers were bowled back by the gusting slam of an invisible wall; wind whipped belatedly from the ringing impact as the lot of them crashed to the mud and went sprawling, head over heels.

Ryuu hopped to balance on the front of the cart, raised her staff high, and shattered the hitch with a solid strike.

In surveying the surroundings, her eyes took a moment to drink in the mayhem of the army. A wall of soldiers was storming her direction from further up in the formation, but not so many as she would have expected if she were alone; the sailing bodies of silver-clad soldiers and warhorses above the hordes in the distance told of Gamagoori and Sanageyama wreaking all the havoc they could muster up front, demanding a good deal of attention themselves. As expected, warmages fired on Ryuu when she was in the air, but they and the archers held their attacks when she returned to ground,

knowing they'd sooner hit the masses of their own than the lone, highly-mobile adversary darting among them.

"Oi, there! Lass!"

A hunched man in the cart, clad in only a loincloth, had shouldered at his blindfold to put half of it up to his brow. His befuddlement with Ryuu was plain, but for the moment he worried not how to make sense of her; he understood she was on his side, and he had just seen her smash apart a quality cart hitch. His hands rose to the side of the cart - pulling the chain between his manacles taut against the frame's edge. "Break it!"

Ryuu gave it a swing, knocking her staff to the chain and up again quick and square. The rebel, shocked in spite of himself as a pair of links shattered, tore off his blindfold and grabbed for a rock he'd stowed behind him, guiding another to position his shackles at the edge.

"Don't get mixed up in the fight," Ryuu managed to caution, recalling the words Gamagoori had suggested. But her voice ran quick, with nerves. "You'll make yourself a target. Just - lay low and wait for your chance to move, when I draw them away!"

"Get moving then! I know that!" the prisoner barked, pegging himself a likely captain.

"G-good! Fantastic!" Ryuu shot back. She didn't botch her footing on the edge of the cart as she switched round to crack an oncoming soldier with her staff, knocked back another with a blinding jab to the helmet, and gathered herself in a crouch before leaping into the air.

Spells screamed past Ryuu as she flew, showing how many had been trained on her; amid twisting away from a number that singed the air too close for comfort, she recognized that she could not continue to jump carelessly. The halfling touched down and ran, head low. She had already noted the location of the now-parked

sixth cart by the number of soldiers that had hunkered all around it, lying in wait to intercept her.

A fully-uniformed knight on an armored horse thundered from the group, leveling a spear her way as he neared. Ryuu cut sharply to the horse's other side and cracked her staff across its front legs, with all her weight behind it. Even braced for the impact, however, it nearly tore the Tenkantsuujou from her hands. The horse toppled with a scream, while Ryuu went tumbling back after it, catching her head painfully on the ground. She'd misread…

The knight had leapt clear of the falling mount, rolling safely into a clanking landing and erupting forward with a cry of war; Ryuu flailed to her feet in time to lean from a furious outward sweep of the spear, and parried another few flashing strikes before disarming him with a cutting motion of her staff. He clasped a sword hilt at his belt - too slow. A fierce jab of the Tenkantsuujou at his gut caused him to grunt, and a follow-up swing left him sprawling senseless to the mud, helmet clattering down seconds after he.

Ryuu turned at yet another clatter of hooves, and a well-fed man who looked about fifty, silver-streaked hair trimmed short, mustache square and beard neat, dismounted smoothly as his horse passed her by. Instead of rushing her he remained where he landed, five meters off, and clapped his palms together before spreading them wide.

The itch lit across Ryuu's ears before she understood the spell that enclosed them. All she saw was the nearby space shifting, and a glimmering boundary that ran with faint streaks of arcana establishing itself a short radius around them; the world beyond that radius was diminished to a blur, soldiers and horses light or dark smudges and shapes, while farther-off scenery that had been visible was washed out into bleeding regions of indistinct color.

But the blurred forms of soldiers skittered nearer with impossible speed, piling around the boundary in a mass that condensed with each passing moment. Ryuu met eyes with the smugly grinning man

across from her, gathering cues - polished armor, fine clothes, the bearing of a noble and the health despite his age - even as she shoved toward him with a curse.

A Slowsphere!

The local lord, and as she now knew, an Order mage who could handle Time spells. He backed away at the sight of Ryuu's approach, eyes scornful - and the bubble of distortion evaporated, revealing around them a ring of soldiers with shields on their arms, and their blades leveled toward Ryuu. Each second within the Sphere's boundary had marked several outside.

The noble dipped hurriedly into the crowd as it tightened warily around the halfling; his eyes were wide with excitement as he watched her hold up her staff, light on her toes and turning to sneer at her adversaries - but by all accounts, surrounded.

"Keep moving and no one can catch you, hmm? Just your luck. You can only be the creature they spoke of - yes, the dragonchild, was it?" the nobleman mused. "When I present you to Her Majesty the queen… perhaps I shall request an award of land far richer than this uncivilized *cesspool* great-grandfather was saddled with…"

Ryuu lashed out, knocking a testing spear hard with her staff as soldiers continued to close in shuffling and squelching steps. She turned and repeated, warding off mere pieces of the steady advance, to little effect. There were no gaps, and they were tensing, preparing to lunge. She tensed. She could jump. Which direction? With the time they'd had to prepare, how many mages were looking to roast her the moment she cleared head-level of anyone else? A few she could dodge. Enough shots at once, and some were bound to hit. Her present odds were no better. If the warriors closed in they would bash her with those shields until they put her on the ground, and keep at it until she stopped moving.

Sweat fell in her eye, causing her the slightest flinch.

The first soldier to leap for her was rebutted by a solid, upward sweep of the Tenkantsuujou about his ribs. Spinning from the move, she kept her staff at a length one-and-a-half times her height for the advantage of reach, whipping about wildly to repel strikes and rap a few shields, hunting for places she could slip and jab the polearm past defenses. A few lucky strikes, but she couldn't keep them at bay.

A spear grazed her hip even as she clocked the attacker across the skull. She couldn't push them back or break through, with how close-knit they had already packed in; they formed a barricade of animate steel, and the ring of them extended at least several meters back, dragging clear and refilling the places of those who fell.

A burning slice caught the back of her shoulder as she twisted and hopped clear, and she lost balance trying to fend off two strikes from the side she neared in quick succession. The moment a knight locked up her staff with blocking his slash, a broad shield cracked squarely about the wrapped Bakuzan's sheathe and the back of her ribs. Another few rushed emboldened from the sides, the knight raised up his shield for a downward strike at the front, and the ring around her began to collapse inward, eager to crush.

She dropped her knees and hips, teeth clenched - and sprang high into the air, gasping for breath.

A fusillade of spells soared to meet her.

The fastest, a churning blast of flame.

The halfling's frantic expression flattened as a thought occurred to her. *Actually…*

Lip curled in a sneer, she thrust out her hand with fingers curled as if to catch. The fireball ruptured on impact - crashing across her in a molten spray of shimmering red heat, and beginning to sear white. Then it exploded, engulfing her entirely in a billow of bursting flame.

Sharp teeth flashed through her smirk. She mouthed the word as the heat consumed her, lashing flames folding around but failing to burn.

A boiling shockwave repelled the incoming spells - and a gargantuan beast descended upon the cluster of soldiers, landed with a seismic smash of claws that seized for traction amid scattering mud, and leveled a swathe of them with a tremendous sweep of her tail. She drew back her head, lungs swelling with air.

The great beast's shattering roar shook them to the bones, resounding, ferocious, and laced with venomlike scorn; they began to scramble, and her claws ripped from the muck to swat through packs of them, tearing, finding armor and as quickly rending flesh. Her fangs snapped at one and flung him easily as a doll into the air behind her, his bleeding form arcing to perilous heights. With another lunge, her horns cut an armored horse from the earth, crumbling sturdy bones while launching it into another bunch of fleeing troops.

None were keen on remaining in reach of the towering *ryuu* ; but those further out now had a clear target, well above risk of the soldiers' heads even when she stood on the ground. This was made clear as a volley of spells pummeled against her side and neck. While streams of Scorch rolled from her midnight blue scales, no more than annoyance, blasts of Shock and pelting shards of Frost stung painfully, some actually aspiring to gash at her hide.

Ryuu snorted angrily, leaping to close the distance to a cluster of mages but taking fire as she did. They turned to flee, but couldn't outrun a vengeful swing of her claws.

More spells came arcing toward her, and she turned, prepared to lunge - faltering to see that the assailants had stationed themselves by a cart of bound rebel prisoners, using them as deterrent to her retaliation.

A heavy *thwang* sounded. Sensing disturbed air, she turned to sight the ballista bolt on a course for her side and leapt sharply in avoidance, thrusting down with her wings to fling into the air.

She rolled from the heart of a volley of arrows, cut aside from blasts of Shock that split the air and left the stench of ozone simmering in their wake. Another massive bolt sang from a cart-mounted ballista, and she angled her wings with a strong beat to ascend.

A faltering screech, at a twinge of pain. *My back… !*

It had been a white lie, to boast her full recovery from the battle of the gala - or rather, from the arduous escape from the capital. The strain of flying injured and overweight with so many passengers, for so many kilometers, had been extreme.

The bolt struck her chest with a punch where she stalled, knocking the scrambling dragon's path askew and eliciting a throaty bark, though it very much failed to pierce; the stretch of her spanning her throat to her chest, and all the way down her underbelly, was lined with her thickest plates. She beat her wings through the pain, struggling unsteadily to climb as two more bombardments of spells closed in from different directions. An assortment of Shock and Scorch, and opposite these, a hail of shimmering arcanic bolts that told of *elementless* magic - at once all the Ravage elements and none.

But the rain of multicolored Tri-Ravage was slightly off-course as it neared; only when it cut into the path of the other attacks, dispersing them in its vivid light, did Ryuu understand. Jakuzure had finally given away her position, on a sheltered ridge to a side of the battlefield.

Ryuu flashed her teeth appreciatively for the assistance as she righted herself in the air, and took the opportunity to gather power deep in her breast.

The beast looked down on the Crown forces. Many had answered her transformation by grouping up near the prisoners, but given their numbers, plenty remained a comfortable distance still. She drew back her head, target area fixed.

A missile of flame went screaming from her maw, crashing over fleeing troops and rolling, splattering vibrantly across the earth. The drake swept down with crimson eyes wide, spraying a magnificent curtain of destruction over their ranks as she bore down on them with utter disregard for bolts and spells that peppered her hide.

Ryuu landed heavily on her feet behind the army, running a few bounds and shaking off the sting of the spells that had flitted against her. Looking back with a coarse grumble and flash of her fangs, spitting a gust that stank of brimstone and ash, she paused.

She had never seen so many people on fire.

She had seen people burned alive for a spectacle in one of the queen's Celebrations, years ago. Like most of the capital, she had witnessed slaughter. But the sight of soldiers and horses screaming, running and writhing and collapsing, roasting in their armor as burning fingers fought to tear it away… She cringed, and was suddenly uncomfortably aware of the red glaze caked with the mud on her heavy claws, and the taste of the ones she'd crunched up like eggshells in her fangs.

It was too *many* . Ryuu had killed before, had maimed before, enough not to let it faze her any longer; they'd been thugs who had messed with the wrong thief, or filthy noblesse and those who fattened their pockets working for them. In the capital's underworld, a reputation was armor. You hit hard enough, or you ran with people who hit hard enough on your behalf, that fellow lawbreakers knew better than expecting to cross you without consequence. She'd gotten used to making examples over little things, when on increasingly rare occasion a cause presented itself in the form of a cocky scoundrel's disrespect or an ignorant mook looking for a fight; breaking someone's arms was a right fair price for not having to look

over her shoulder when she wandered her streets. The more pain she'd doled out, the less often she'd had need to.

She'd just never offed so many so *quickly* . Her tongue flickered at her teeth. She'd never balked at the taste of blood, never thought twice about not minding it. Why it gave her pause *now* -

She leapt belatedly to the side, screeching as a ballista bolt came arcing through her wing - not large enough to do much damage alone, but still smarting fiercely where the membrane punctured and tore.

Ryuu needed to focus. She had a job to do, a job she'd bloody well volunteered herself for, and she had brought along fellows who'd been mad enough to depend on her.

A spear knocked against her shoulder, cracking against scales and falling pitifully down. A javelin.

She angled her head to study the burly knight who wound up again as he approached, grunting and letting fly. She turned to let the spear fail on the proud, sturdy plates of her breast. Tens of dozens beheld the man's courageous approach; he grabbed another javelin roughly from a squire who kept at his side, stepping and throwing with all his might. His face was a snarl, framed by a helm crowned in two curved, jutting horns. Silver-white armor glinted in the grey light, its polished sleekness bright despite flecks of mud and glimmering rain.

"Fight me, Godwing! Fight and fall, in the name of the Queen!"

He had aimed for her eye; she tossed her head, cutting the projectile down with a horn. Her nostrils flared as she pawed the earth, etching grooves in the curling mud; she drew up tall, and a long, low grumble bubbled up her throat. *Fall?*

He beat a new javelin against his intricate kiteshield a few solid times, showing his teeth and barking his challenge gallantly over the

clanking din of steel.

*Me, fall? To **you?*** Her lip curled at the thought, for reasons she could not explain, reasons that traced to depths too abyssal to fathom.

He had been the champion of the Celebration's javelin-hurling contest. He could torture a man to death with impeccable precision, smiling as he did. He was a showman who had rejoiced in his stage, beckoned and riled his noble audience and soaked up admirers' cheers. He was a savage.

Standing before Ryuu, he was no more than an ant.

Do you know how big I am? she thought, the spitting growl rising slowly, steadily in her throat as she took a rumbling step toward him. He was blind with the prospect of glory, with a hunter's love of sport. The creature before her regarded himself a rare talent among his fellows, a man of all men, and so found himself taken with illusions of infallibility. He had perhaps squared off most fairly with bandits and criminals, and found none even remotely worthy of compare. He was tall enough to render his squire dwarfed at his side, with a broadness of shoulders to match. For all his size and musculature and silvery steel he was light on his toes; a deep maroon cape crinkled and danced at his back as he moved, circling toward the side and sizing up his draconic mark before he threw again.

She lunged. The javelin splintered apart over the crown of her skull an eyeblink before mighty jaws sealed around the challenger, borne by as if by a striking serpent of colossal proportion.

The knight wheezed, sputtering in shock as he found teeth piercing him, armor cracked open where they'd met it; he hung half from the side of her mouth, torso rent all but in two by a pair of jagged fangs. Finest armor and shield, of no better service than a beggar's rags. His hand touched a great, impaling fang in bewilderment, trembling as his blood began to course outward, his body to split, and his situation truly struck him. He screeched, glancing a dagger off a fang before jamming it into her gums. It almost *tickled* .

*What do you think I **am**?*

The world blossomed vividly crisp and clear, yet her mind was awash with a boiling haze, thrilled energy sizzling wildly through every limb. She could kill right now with so much as a twitch, a shiver of cold. She unconsciously tested the glimmering prize in her jaws for resistance, playing gently tighter and softer again, just to marvel at how readily he yielded. All but indiscernible to her. His wails told a different story.

Her eye flickered at a whimper nearby, gaze catching on the squire that had trailed at his knight-master's side. The white-faced youth jumped at the eye contact, stumbling over his feet as he hastened to back away, near to ill.

A wicked smile shone in the eyes of the towering fiend. Murder. Glee.

For the briefest moments, those crimson eyes grew distant.

The murky sleekness of a puddle, shattered with the splash of a passing foot. She presses on, mindless, dogged.

She can't botch her first job.

Not after getting so far, not after getting spotted and nearly cornered by the house guards and somehow giving them the slip. How far will they pursue? But the noblesse house's alarms are far behind her, and the familiar darkness of Middle City wraps around her again. She's in the place where streetlights no more than sputter, where the houses lean and the road is rough and city planning was such an afterthought that the right alleys now become a maze. She doesn't need to follow any newly-studied maps anymore. She knows how to disappear just fine, here.

These are her streets. There was a reason they called her the best runner the guild had on hand, and a reason her stalwart old Boss

decided to let her get a taste of real work at age twelve. She begged for a thieving job, a bigger one than petty pickpocketing practice or playing doe-eyed distraction while an older brother or sister of the guild nabbed the unsuspecting target. And the Lord of Thieves relented to her impatience, his faith in her quickness and her Sensei's training no doubt. She clutches the pouch closer under her chest, suppressing the jingle it tries to give off. They'll see, soon. They'll be so impressed…

Before she knows it she's gone cutting through alleyways and shortcuts, zipping across an abandoned shelter, clambering over a fence, skirting the vague edge of rival turf but easily avoiding it - for with it is the edge of what her body knows familiar, knows better than her head knows city maps for the rest. She's round practiced corners, up a stairway and down another and through a hole in a wall she's still just small enough to test how cleanly she can dive through, and tucks and rolls to keep running out the other side. She's snapped to a familiar route. It's autopilot, from there.

Before she understands it, she's home free. No more shouts behind her, no more lawmen's magelight lanterns bobbing furiously in the night. Her worn shoes patter to a halt on the crooked sidestreet, and though her heartbeat shakes her and her breath is racing and her skull is whirring with excitement that just begins to settle, she grins a giddy, triumphant grin. She's got her mark, and she shook the last of the opposition a ways back in a maze she's learned better than anyone. When she first arrived in the city, the dark of night frightened her. Now it is where she thrives.

The girl almost begins to laugh before the arm snakes around her, and she's snatched bodily into the alley, feet flailing at the air.

A long hand muffles her scream as she's dragged further in, and she immediately bites. A curse, and the hold falters enough for her to twist free; she doesn't spare a glance for her assailant before she runs, but the haste doesn't let her get away. She's just rising from her landing when a foot catches her about the ribs, tossing her to a wall of the narrow passage. The bag she cradled so close hits

ground with a muted, metallic plink, and she watches with wide eyes as the man stoops to grab it. His face hidden by a bandana, his smirk reaching all the way to his leering eyes.

"Lucky me! What's in the bag, kiddo?" he asks, teasing the string from the pouch before he looks away from the quavering kid. For all the exaggerated, sugary tone of his question, the thug's eyes widen when he sees the heirloom nestled inside. Hardly priceless, but a fancy enough trinket to hold a good bit of value to it. His eye carefully appraising by the starlight, he whistles. "Color me impressed."

It's only when his gaze remembers the petrified girl that she realizes she's past due to run. She can barely start toward the mouth of the alley before he's kicked an old paint bucket at her; it glances off her shoulderblade with a crack, making her reel enough for him to lunge and grab her arm. She stumbles as she tries to pull away, but he easily tows her back.

He's bigger than her, stronger. Her teeth clatter uncontrollably as she looks up at his amused sneer, the flash of uneven teeth in the near-dark, as her eyes pick out the lattice of tattoos all over his arms. The mook is no thief she knows of.

Her heart drops. Rival guild, toeing the territory boundaries. Chancing it, just like she was, but waiting for prey.

"Who you under, girlie?" He shakes the pouch he's stolen from her. "Can't be any ol' stray, nabbing goods like this. Who in their right mind's sending brats to play the game in Upper City?"

She shakes her head furiously, lips sealed. Having no luck in pulling free, she gets a hold of her panic and jams the edge of her free hand suddenly in the crook of his elbow, grabbing his hand and hurling her weight to topple him onto his backside. He spits a curse, but keeps his hold as she tries to wrest her hand free. She kicks at him, but he only rises with an annoyed sound, ducking behind her, twisting her arm, and slamming her forward into a wall, and her are feet off the ground once more.

The humor in his voice has quickly worn thin. "I'll ask again. *Who's your boss?* " he hisses, shifting. "Who've I got the pleasure of cheating out of some cheaply-won loot?"

A knife jams into the meat of her shoulder, burning cold and dry to the heat of her blood, and she screeches aloud and shudders what little she can against the chipped, musty wall.

She can make the Change that tugs so desperately at her senses - can, shouldn't, will - a change that can make her bigger, and stronger, than he. But he struck a nonlethal spot so he could strike as hard as he pleased, and the blade is touching bone, it's grating raggedly at the bone and he doesn't care how much it hurts-

Her mind flashes to another place and time, to a bolt punching her in the side and lodging there, burning like fire in her ribs while she tries to fly away, to escape, to keep from falling on the bag slung round her neck while she flails her wings in terror and pain, she's never hurt so badly-

"T-Tongue-Cutter!" she sputters, still clawing mindlessly at the wall. The rank and file don't know the true name of the Thieflord they answer to. But suddenly she's free, toppling down to her knees. Sweating in pain while she looks back at the other thief, who's backing off uncertainly, and whom she now realizes dropped her in surprise, as if burned.

"Don't bluff with me!" he says suddenly, though he doesn't sound as though he's convinced enough to wager laying another hand on her. "What's he, runnin' a daycare these days?!"

"He'll hunt down anyone who steals from him," the child growls, trying not to sniffle in the sewage-stench of the alley as she gathers herself to her feet. She can do it, can handle it without risking the Change; she'll guard her secret, just like she's meant to. She'll *win* . Her vision throbs red, and the alley's shadows sharpen around her, sound and smell blossoming furiously into contrast and shape and shifting color. She burns. The world is wildly abuzz, and she with it.

She grasps at her bleeding shoulder, feeling at where the knife is stuck but shaking too badly to recall how she's supposed to go about addressing it. She fights down sickness at the clashing sensations, and redirects the pain into a vicious, bitter rage that puts a snarl to her words.

"His thugs'll haul you in and he'll ask you about holdin' me up, and he'll know if you lie. And sure as you know 'is godsdamned name, you know what happens then," she warns, sticking out her tongue for emphasis.

He considers her a moment. He reaches behind his back, serious. "Bastard won't find me if you don't rat. Let's say one grubby *brat* won't be missed enough for *anyone* to come trackin' me down-,"

He hasn't finished pulling the weapon by the time she's sprung from the wall and up toward him, smashing a tightly-balled fist into his throat. His eyes cross in time with the resulting crunch, and he reels, hatchet clattering to the dirt. When he hunches, clawing numbly, frantically about his windpipe, the small Ryuu has already ripped the pouch of loot from his fingers. Beating him over the back with it a few times is enough to get the staggering thug to overbalance, to put him on his knees and a lot closer to her level.

Panting and stumbling away, she pauses, eyes never daring to leave him. Then she rips the knife from her shoulder-

The crossbow bolt, cut free-

Her fangs ripping into the shooter's leg, furious, but not enough to neutralize the threat-

The same man's eyes dully upturned, smoke curling from his head as the young man from the printing shop stands above him, pistol cocked back after the shot rang out-

And she shanks the thug on the ground, thrusting the knife to hilt right where she's been taught to.

The protest that gurgles at his crushed windpipe is horrible, but she screeches and twists the knife when he starts to jerk a hand her way in retaliation. She slashes the kidney on the way out and stabs him again, not giving him a chance to rise, and repeats, for good measure, until she stands over his prone form and he's good and well stopped moving. Not so much as a twitch. The knife is slippery in her hands, and her shirt, matted to her shoulder, is now splattered all over the front with stains. In the moment, she can't imagine ever again being rested enough to catch her breath.

And her look is cold, almost proud - all raggedness and spite. She bares her teeth with a hiss of mingled enmity and pain, and she turns away, grabbing up her pouch of loot and slinging its weight over her good shoulder without relinquishing the soiled knife. So she hobbles along a route for a backway to the Dancing Pig, tongue flicking restlessly about her lips. She doesn't fear being bothered again, and she isn't. But if she is, she'll just… She's ready for whatever she needs to do. Her breath burns, her senses are in overdrive, animal reflexes feel ready to fire at triple speed. Her eyes twitch down toward the knife, catching it in a fleeting glint.

The old mountain lion's fangs, shattering on her armored neck. Her fangs, mimicking the technique to lethal efficacy, resolving their encounter in a single neck-wrenching snap.

Her hand tightens on a knife that's almost too big for it, crackling up the dried blood and squeezing out between her fingers the wet. Whatever her shape, she is stronger than the others. She can't be stopped…

She is no one's prey.

Ryuu already knew that. She'd learned it as she came into her strength, when she became the Underworld's Ryuu and turned one of Middle City's most cutthroat lines of work into a personal game - a game she only knew how to win. Taking any risk, banking on a trump card she'd for so long never actually been forced to play.

The roiling frenzy in her heart receded to a simmer, burning steady but controlled. She had taken lives in that curst city. Enough not to lose her wits minutes onto a battlefield, for certain.

She clenched her jaws sharply, and the knight-in-training screamed along with his master's howl. One vicious, splattering crunch, and she cast what remained of the fallen knight aside, murder in her eyes and blood on her fangs as she scanned stunned onlookers. Her dripping jaws parted, belching out smoke from the broad chasm of her throat. Who else bore a challenge?

Her face worked into a brutish snarl, and she drew back her head and flared her wings before unleashing a long and bestial roar, snout wrinkled and saliva trailing from her tongue. Soldiers heard it and faltered, unable to take their eyes from the posturing fiend, frozen bodies begging for commands to flee.

Look at me, Ryuuko thought furiously, brandishing a set of claws and hacking at the earth. She tossed her head and snapped knifelike fangs together once, twice, excitement blazing in monstrous red eyes as soldiers cowered and quaked at the display. She was furious; she would rage and thrash on this battleground to her heart's content, and teach the *invincible* Crown of something to fear. But she'd more or less kept her head on straight, enough to keep in mind the plan.

She would fight until she could barely fly; if it came down to the last of her strength, she would use it to flee.

Gods, did she hope Yaota saw fit to charge before then.

"Shingan: Tensenzuki!"

The knight facing Sanageyama was blown back by the strikes, trailing blood from gashes in the weak points of his armor and crumpling where he fell. The victor gave a spirited shout of challenge, facing down a new opponent that charged his way.

Spotting Gamagoori preparing to smash his shield down upon some poor unfortunate souls a ways off, the green-haired combatant hopped - and his new adversary lost his footing as the ground gave a terrific jolt. Sir Uzu struck out in a flash, finishing it cleanly before he could rise again.

"You're a hazard, *Gama!* " the knight called, freeing his sword and rushing to catch up as the former Chief of Enforcers swung a bludgeoning shield after another Augment mage who rolled and retreated in dizzyingly swift evasions. Gamagoori planted the shield on the earth as throwing knives bounced from its front - and he turned to give Sanageyama a boosted step from one massive hand, charging him with Swift as he did. The knight rolled over the top of the shield, flipping into the opposing mage's view and plunging with a slash more quickly than he could respond.

"You keep naming your attacks," Gamagoori grunted as he took up the greatshield again. "But you've none of the Gravity charms you're used to…"

"I'm staying fired up," Sanageyama defended, brandishing his sword at a nearing group of foes with a sharp, showy series of flicks. He had taken up another knight's blade when the iron one had broken with use, and it so far served him well. The two men were worse for wear, sweat blotting through their robes; blood shone about a graze that had sparked on the chainmail at Uzu's chest, and a line was dyed crimson down his cheek, jawline, and neck, from a good nick near his ear. "I can still *use* the moves without the tricks; and even if they're less effective than normal, I've gotten so used to an overweight sword that normal ones spoil me!"

The taller man snorted, but began to channel Chaos as he waved for the sword Sanageyama held. The knight held it out, and the warrior-mage tapped the flat of the blade with two fingers, causing it to darken and hum.

Sir Uzu took off, making use of the last of the Swift spell from before. He raced through the approaching units like a gale, engaging each

soldier just long enough to cross blades a single time, whether in strike or parry. As someone who had sparred with the princess time and again, his swordplay remained exceptional in his exhaustion; by the time he broke away from the last of them, crouch-spread feet sliding to a halt at their backs, he'd suffered not a single strike.

"Gravity!"

The twenty soldiers Sanageyama had just engaged found their weapons snapping down at Gamagoori's command, dropping to the dirt - and a moment later, the roaring part-giant was bludgeoning through their ranks with fist and shield, launching many through the air.

Sanageyama fended off another wave until Gamagoori reached them, lunging to grab a man by the torso, draw him back, and throw the horrified mook at another couple of foes who toppled at the impact. The pair was a sight to behold - the light-footed knight dancing about and cutting down enemies in a lightning string of duels, the hulking Enforcer ramming, swinging, and charging fearlessly through groups of enemies to keep them disorganized and scattered.

Gamagoori landed from a leaping shield charge, soldiers still sailing from where he'd passed, and slid several meters on his feet before planting his shield in the mud, leaning on it a moment. The familiar, cocktail ache of channeling and exertion was pounding through him with the boom of his heart, prying on steel nerves. His shield was actually beginning to feel heavy, his arm to slump under the weight.

Is this all we can muster…? Grimly he blinked sweat from his eyes, watching a group of charging Crown soldiers overtaken by a fiery barrage of Tri-Ravage blasts that tore in a scattered line across their path.

No time for rest. Teeth clenched, he drew the shield upward again, swinging it above his shoulder as he turned to slam it down with a roar. The strike shattered the earth, and an arcanic wave of Rend

rushed violently through expanding cracks in a cone that stretched forty meters from where he stood, tossing up enemy soldiers with dislocated hunks of terrain.

He felt a twinge as he began to hoist the shield again. For a moment, his strength faltered.

And a spear crashed into his back.

The spearman behind it jolted with the strike, hands slipping on the shaft as if he'd taken a stab at a wall of brick. Amid pulling it free, he registered that the blade had pierced hardly a centimeter into the hulking man's flesh. And before he might consider his next course of action, the part-giant's boot swung around to eject him from Gamagoori's immediate vicinity.

In another spurt of engagements, Gamagoori took slashes to his arms and body, a graze to his ribs. All shallow to his armor-like muscle and skin, but nevertheless he began to slow. He grabbed at a man who leapt on his back, getting a hold about his helmet by which to slam him to the ground, and he panted in the damp, melting air as he raised hardened eyes again. Sir Uzu was taking longer to dispatch his foes, nearly getting boxed in despite Ira's best efforts to break up the enemy's ranks.

In the distance a mighty Ryuu was lifting a mounted ballista cart and all in hind claws, carrying it a short way with a combative screech before flinging it at her earthbound foes; she howled with menace as she ducked from the hearts of as many volleys of arrows, javelins, and spells as she could escape, but her mud-spattered hide showed scraped and glazing patches of glistening, blackish-red ichor where attacks had gotten the better of it. Against enemies who held prisoners scattered among them, she faced her worst sort of battle: the king-beast's wrath was too destructive for her to recklessly unleash, but there stood too many foes for her human form to long contest.

Surely we've done enough? Ira wondered, wincing as he took a slash meant for Sir Uzu, his eyes wide, and pain lit across his muscled back from shoulder to hip. The knight's face twisted in a snarl, and he leapt over Ira's shoulder to descend in a whirlwind-like flurry of strikes, cutting the assailant down with a vengeful yell.

Where are *they?*

Ira rose just before his knee might have reached the dirt - rising whilst shoving out a fist that repelled, with a concussive *CRACK*, another man who sought Uzu's blind spot. Sweat ran heavily over him. The numbers had only been *dented*, but the Crown soldiers had certainly been *dragged*, tooth and claw, into turmoil. The ludicrous vanguard had seen to that.

So where is the rebel commander's army?!

The sound of a horn pealed out across the battlefield - a trumpet, each note crisp and clear in the baking midday air. The declaration, piercing and bold as they came, gradually drew the eyes of many a combatant and commander, of two fugitives and a gargantuan drake, of mages and knights and siege engine operators all around.

At the crest of a hill to the northeast, seated upon the saddle of a chestnut brown steed, Kiryuuin Satsuki looked back at them.

The princess struck an imposing figure, chin high as she coolly surveyed the field. She wore Junketsu in its more innocuous dormant state, but the armor's visible quality accentuated a regal bearing. The Darkstrider girl sat unmasked on the back of another horse at her side, and the military trumpeter stood beside another woman on horseback who bore a blue-white standard.

"The crest of the counterinsurgency!" Ira heard a soldier utter hopefully. And other whispers - the princess had emerged to conquer the dragon. Wishful, but halting. They already knew it failed to add up.

The ex-Enforcer shook his head slightly, while Sir Uzu, still on his guard, sported a tired but wickedly triumphant grin.

"No," Ira said. "That's no icon of counterinsurgency any longer. From this day forward, it is commandeered to new meaning…"

The black-haired princess drew a longsword in the silence that followed the trumpet's announcement, raising it into the air as she calmly began to fill her lungs. Then she brandished her weapon, sank forward, and kicked her horse into a run, galloping down the hill and rising and falling in flawless time with the warhorse's gait. Her cold eyes grew, harsh and intent, and a cry of battle issued powerfully from deep in her chest.

The shout belted forth with indescribable ferocity, heralding her arrival - firm and true as a pointing lance, so as to impress an overwhelming challenge on the heart of every single foe.

Gamagoori had no doubt that every soldier in attendance who swore loyalty to the reigning queen knew unmistakably, in that moment, that they were Kiryuuin Satsuki's *enemy* - a status that proved most formidable to contemplate, even in the breath before her *own* waves of soldiers began cascading over the hill behind her, tearing for the battlefield in a thunderous storm of hooves.

The army the Junpakko led to the field joined in her impassioned roar. Even drenched in sweat and dirt after riding hard to get here in time, and even though they numbered perhaps a hundred to the greater opposition of remaining Crown forces, they followed her charge with neither doubt nor hesitation.

Of course they did, Ira thought. They would follow their general anywhere; they relished in the honor of accompanying her on this charge. How could they but brim with inspiration as Kiryuuin Satsuki-hime led them to battle, donning and flourishing in brilliance stunning as could be - when at long last, she commanded all who would follow her true to her ambition?

"No hiding anymore," he whispered, admiration brimming in his chest. The exiled princess would have joined her companions on this field, even had gods themselves forbade her.

Ira's shield was upraised with sudden strength. He joined heartily in the ongoing roar of attack, and leapt to go bowling through another throng of foes.

~ ~

Vanguard

End

[img: https://orig00.deviantart.net/2cc7/f/2018/172/e/9/mu_satsukiandsenketsu_by_hinata0321-dcf2tjj.png]

Art by Mu

Excerpt from A Primer on the Arcane Arts

Spells of Rend prove most effective on solids of simple composition; homogeneous stones of the utmost hardness are easily Rent to pieces, whereas biological tissues are not highly susceptible to Rend. A human body struck with Rend might be pushed from the spell bouncing away, or report suffering a moment's nausea or fatigue - yet the spell is employed to drastic effect by great warmages, in rupturing the environment around their targets.

Thanks Mu for letting me feature your lovely fanart! <3

Strike the Heart

Chapter 22: Strike the Heart

'Fashionably late' - yeah, let's go with that ^^;

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/a5c5/f/2017/064/f/c/tigerdragonstoryfin_by_hinata0321-db1cq4c.png]

Twenty-Two \ Strike the Heart

When her forces crashed upon the Crown army's ranks, Satsuki marked a ruthless example as their leader and the first of them to strike.

Her longsword lashed with the might of a full gallop against footsoldiers who were unable to move clear; she adjusted her course to storm past cavalrymen, parrying blows and breaking past a handful before swinging up her boot in smooth timing to line up with another rider's breastplate, unseating him in a skillful transfer of force. Frost arcana flared around her and her steed, spinning rapidly into a whirlwind of freezing shards that surged outward to swat back a flurry of shattering arrows and spells. She snapped the reins and maintained her furious pace across the packed mud, sure to punish any who dared contest her progress.

She locked eyes with the noble general some eighty meters out - a well-armored, neatly trimmed man of dusty silver hair - and even behind a wall of soldiers that set up to face her, he startled where he stood. The princess flicked out her stained sword as she galloped onward, steel and fire in her eyes.

"Tokijirou Matsuhiko! *On your guard!!*"

Satsuki leapt from her horse's back with impossible strength; arrows sailed past her as she arced forward and descended to the side, Junketsu's royal blue robes rippling at her back. Grand currents of Frost leapt about her as she twirled in the air, and the bright blue arcana shaped into a smooth, curving sweep of ice that solidified along the ground just as her feet glided onto its surface - a glimmering, elongated crescent slide that bore her crouching weight down, near to the level of the earth, and smoothly up a ramp at its terminus.

She jumped with her departure from the slick surface, speed scarcely diminished as she sailed over rows of shocked soldiers who had crouched with square shields up and pikes out to meet a grounded advance; she flipped and spun, still artfully beckoning the tides of arcana that chased her - and in the moment she faced the barricade's back, she loosed a wave of heavy icicle shards that battered into their ranks.

Then she landed with a roll over her shoulder, and sprang for the horrified general and the two retainers who stood close before him.

One of the retainers lunged to greet her with an overhead slash of the broadsword in his hands.

Satsuki raised her longsword to block, before even returning to the ground - letting the clanging force of his strike push her feet to the earth, and letting it seem she would be driven back. Let them think he'd ground her momentum to a halt.

The second retainer, seeing her begin to turn her shoulders and toes, to shift hard toward her left, rushed in that direction - eager to counter, with his curved sword poised to strike.

And Tokijirou, teeth clenched, sent a bubble of distortion rippling out to encompass the four of them. A Slowsphere, Satsuki presumed, to give his outside soldiers time to close in.

Such a ploy might even have worked, she mused, *had Fate presented you a foe encumbered by hesitation.*

The Junpakko was no such enemy.

Her eyes snapped wide, power roaring through her veins.

[ASPECT OF THE TIGER]

The retainer who had crossed blades with Satsuki cleaved through no more than an afterimage as he shoved forward, eyes wide. Satsuki may have flickered into view only briefly in the air beyond him and to his left, sword drawn back; at his other side, his fellow still blinked at the empty space she'd been, and where he'd been led to expect her to evade to.

Then Satsuki accelerated impossibly once more with a palpable, audible thrashing of space - armor boots sliding to a low, screeching halt through the mud at the general's opposite side. The path of her outstretched sword was traced in an arc of sailing, blossoming crimson from her strike.

Tokijirou began to yell as his body opened across his front, blood leaping from a slash vicious enough to split the armor beneath his grand outer robe. His cry cut out as Satsuki rose and reversed her direction in a final burst of speed, materializing again at his opposite side, on the tail end of a twirl, at the same moment that the bubble of Time magic around them twisted and burst.

The pikemen and other soldiers who'd been closing in faltered, halted and balked, at the sight of Tokijirou Matsuhiko's head thudding and rolling to the mud.

The princess stood tall, sword still extended while the body crumpled a few meters from her side. Only when it had met ground did she turn her head, her gaze not even bothering itself with her handiwork before she cast a look over her shoulder, sidelong and deathly severe, at the dozens who stood against her.

"Lay down your weapons," she suggested, "if you desire not to cross blades with the one who will *bury* your wretched queen!"

Many a hand shuddered at the order; faces wrought grimaces as their owners weighed the monster immediately before them against the monster who sat on the throne, and the persecution promised to her traitors.

Even faced with the display Satsuki had just provided, they could not quite slough a lifetime of obedience, could not bring themselves to believe the princess could topple the tyrant queen. Even those who looked close to ill held tightly onto their weapons and shields, doubling down as their officers and fellows resolved to fight.

Satsuki's frown deepened.

At a sharp sweep of her arms, the general's two retainers were run through by two erupting pillars of ice. Satsuki lowered her head, grinding an escaping cough into a growl, hiding the shaking rise and fall of her chest by pinning the soldiers' eyes to the intensity of the glower she leveled past sweat-streaked bangs.

"Very well, then…"

As if on cue a shadow raced over the army, rushing up toward Satsuki's back - and a piercing shriek lanced from the gullet of the winged beast that swooped to rear dauntingly in the air above her, causing the Kiryuuin's opposition to startle back in terror.

Ryuu's tongue curled in, flicking a curious, long and thin object out from beneath it. Then the hovering midnight drake was veiled in a scattering burst of steam, from which plummeted the bare form of a

woman who landed nimbly at Satsuki's right side, staff in one hand and a wrapped weapon falling to land in the other.

"Well met," Ryuu said, teeth making short work of a knotted leather tie. The thief whipped the sheathed Bakuzan from the cloth she'd bundled it in - a cloak, Satsuki found, as the rogue jammed the Tenkantsuujou into the ground and furled the makeshift, saliva-sodden covering about her shoulders. She offered the zweihander that had been promised on the princess's return. "Not gonna lie - I'm glad to see you."

Satsuki's eyebrow twitched as she took hold of the steaming greatsword's hilt, finding it dripped despite the wrapping. "You're a disgrace on the title of *sword-bearer* ."

"You're welcome," Ryuu retorted pleasantly, all fanged smile and snark, and the princess drew her sword in the same motion as lunging for a soldier who'd begun to shift, to cut him down where he stood.

"Why change back now?" Satsuki questioned, as Ryuu rebuffed another with staff and sheathe and the two returned to each other, back to back. "My riders will far from balance the numbers. You would prove effective still on large groups of the enemy."

"Oh," Ryuu said, rolling her shoulders, "but the numbers might be closer to evening out than you'd expect. Time for fine-tuned support; no sense stayin' too big to help when almost every enemy's close to our own."

Satsuki raised a skeptical brow. Then she ascertained what Ryuu, with her recently elevated vantage point, had already found.

Captain Yaota's forces, as pincers that closed on the battlefield from the north and the south.

The young man swung his sword with a grunt, only to recoil from his adversary's deftly rising shield. His body ached, he had lost sight of his unit, and the two white-uniformed, armored soldiers who had closed in on him struck out in turns, without relent. He backpedalled, struggling to keep his wooden shield hoisted, to move it to his defense, as the breath burned in his throat and a loosened boot conspired distractingly with the dragging mud. He felt the superiority in the pair's scowling faces, in their skill, their scorn at the sword he clutched in a failing, blistered and gushing grip; he was no warrior-class soldier, had never been granted the right to wield a sword, and they seemed intent to see him punished for the treachery.

He staggered behind his shield, and hot pain gashed through his plain leather jerkin over his sword-hand's shoulder. He would die here. He was going to die.

The figure lunged past him from low, like a beast of prey - black blade angled as they moved, before surging forward and up in a mighty thrust. The greatsword punched cleanly through a steel breastplate and withdrew again with a shrill whine; without wasting a beat, the new arrival tipped up her sword, stomped strongly toward the other Crown swordsman and spun, blade arcing around and up in a slash that audibly thrashed the air and shattered the shield as she met it. The man behind it crumpled - rent open, impossibly, in the same strike.

"Keep your head on straight," the woman admonished, stance reset and keen blue eyes already scanning the skirmishes near them. Her armor and blue-toned regalia were finer than any he'd laid eyes on before, her raven braid secured tightly in a bun, and her swordplay had been blinding. Magic rippled suddenly to life in the air around her, and a bolt of ice shot at bewildering speed into a group twenty meters away, threading a space between two rebels to spit a Crown soldier through the ribs. "Get back to your unit, take cover, and staunch that bleeding."

"J… Junpakko?" he squeaked, but she'd already gone darting away, weaving through skirmishes with dazzling speed. Her zweihander

carved out ferocious strikes, freeing up rebel soldiers who were under pressure.

They could win - they were already winning, with the princess and the other monsters on their side tearing up the battlefield. At this rate the Crown soldiers would be whittled steadily away, while the rebel losses were few; the proportion of white-clad bodies on the ground reflected as much. This was already a disaster for the Crown.

The damage the great warriors could do, the pressure they could exert, was amplified with the support of ordinary soldiers to occupy the enemy ranks. And the rebel soldiers gained the advantage of facing enemies mentally harried by the very *presence* of those warriors they could not hope to best - distracted by even distant flickers of royal blue or forest green, by a miscellany of small bombs or speeding weapons that flew straight and true from no visible assassin, by the homing Tri-Ravage bolts that would rain without warning from a continually shifting source, by the earth-shaking strikes of a man who could have been a small giant, by the glimpses of a wild, black-maned woman leaping and springing crazily about to blindside their fellows with a staff that broke bones.

They could win, he thought, a scared smile just barely shaping on his lips as he hustled back toward his unit, pressing on his shoulder. They could win, and even he could help them do it. He tried to swallow just to get any more moisture than the humid air provided into his throat. He would wrap his wound quickly, and rejoin the others-

The pain was sudden - a single sharp burst, tapering into a dull burn against the adrenaline-haze of his senses. He touched a hand to his stomach, coughing on acrid moisture coating his throat, and blinked down at a palm stained with liquid he couldn't even feel. Red.

As he lost his bearings, falling onto his side, an enemy soldier strolled past him - a lanky man in good armor and robes. Darkened shadows under his eyes, peppery hair trim and black against pale skin, and his expression mildly peeved.

The newcomer hummed, detached as someone trading vacant pleasantries over tea. "They say the Radiant Dynasty's colors are white and, by traditional extension, *red* - but we manufacture no such vibrant uniforms for our soldiers. Pure before battle, sanguine as a badge of glorious triumph. We aren't supposed to be dyeing these robes with our *own* lives. Really, now…"

The enemy officer shook blood distastefully from the slender, wickedly curved shortsword he held. The young man on the ground blinked, vision rocking as he saw his unit noticing where he lay, saw them yell out and rush for the rambling nobleman who walked on by. He couldn't find his voice to cry out; so he gurgled as he watched them come.

"Really, now," the officer groaned again, drawing another blade - a twin to the first. "All I wanted was to go for the ride, and spend a few days in *civilization*… but the barbarians come skittering into the open, so excited about waving swords."

He lurched into motion, toward one of the rebels who was most separated from the others. The two became blurs to the rest, enclosed for one moment in a pocket of impossibly distorted air - and the distortion faded to reveal the expressionless man stepping past the toppling, bloodied body of his foe. Another lunged for him, and the air flickered again, leaving the attacker sprawling and boneless, the mage unharmed.

Three rushed him together. He held out one of the twin swords before they reached him, swinging his arm smoothly but for pausing as he pointed to each rebel in turn, and stepped curtly back. Eyes keen as steel, now narrowed in focus.

Blood burst from their backs, loosed with no discernible cause. But the mark of a blade was clear - each one pierced through the heart, too fast to make sense of it. Hardly waiting for them to fall, he rushed toward other enemies who faltered, capturing them in Speed bubbles in groups of one or two; when he released the zone of accelerated time, split-seconds later to the outside world, those he'd engaged

were falling without fail. He ducked into and divided skirmishes with the same tactic, leaving even Crown soldiers startled as he dispatched of their foes and flowed on by.

A line of five rebel spearmen charged on him with wooden shields raised, and the mage stepped and spun, his moves like a dance, blades glinting as he moved to cover a few meters before they were too close. If one were to trace the twin swords' paths, the line they etched through the traversed space would paint an elegant ribbon spun parallel to the approaching row of rebel soldiers, about the height of each man's neck.

The quietly sneering mage centered himself again and rolled back in an acrobatic handspring, that their formation would not too soon shift to begin to surround, and he hopped back while flourishing his swords in a graceful stance, for show. One of the rebels faltered - slowed in the slightest, as he lost his nerve.

"Wait-!"

The word was not out before the other four jolted, weapons falling from their hands and eyes round as they sprawled heavily to the earth. The remaining one gawked, staggered away in terror. Their shields - the invisible power had slit their throats, bypassing their shields.

The survivor watched as a man on horseback - this time one of the princess's soldiers - rode at the warmage from behind, sword poising to strike. The mage spun low across the horse's path before it reached him, and leapt to create distance. The horse toppled with a scream as it reached the place he'd been, a split front knee spurting red as it twisted beneath it.

The noble spun while flicking his blade upward in an artful slash, and leapt from the path of the thrown rider, without looking back. The wound that appeared marked the unhorsed soldier's stomach without changing his course; he hit the ground gracelessly and

tumbled past the tall mage with the vacant stare, writhing where he fell.

The warmage's eyes settled again on the lone spearman. "Well, haven't you been watching closely… Learn anything?"

His disarming calm clashed with the speed of his sprint; with no tricks about it, in a moment he was reaching the spearman and striking out, even while forming a Time bubble around them. The man narrowly blocked and backpedalled, swinging down his spear in a flailing strike. The mage dodged, and the spearman yelled and threw his weight into a lunge behind his shield.

"Oh?" The mage tapped the edge of his blade to the shield's surface as he rolled back with the move. "Even a blocking blade can be fatal, if you throw yourself onto it like this…"

The man realized his mistake as his momentum carried him forward. The mage's look was mildly amused, almost gloating.

"Temporal Drift."

Pain broke across his waist, directly behind his shield, as his torso crossed the location the mage's blade had been poised just moments prior.

The bubble around them vanished; some mud the warmage had kicked from his dash was still spattering down.

The young man on the ground, whose unit lay dead and whose hand at his stomach was soaking in a promise to join them, saw the mage grab at the falling spearman's collar and lift him up with one hand, just high enough that the other hand's blade could stick him neatly through the ribs.

Someone… stop him… His sight was fluttering, dim. The man was tossing the body aside, scanning for another fight to cut into. *Junpakko… Someone…*

A cry of battle, and the mage blocked a vicious strike of Captain Yaota's sword.

He hopped back, as if to retreat. But the captain refused the bait, instead stepping well away from where a strike of a Timeblade would almost certainly land. She saw with some unease the fleeting disturbance that flickered on the air, as the nobleman scowled across from her - and Yaota's second-in-command, a dark-haired man a few years her junior, rushed from her side to lunge with a spear as the nobleman dodged aside, and a Speedsphere curved around them.

A moment on the battlefield beyond, the movement within mere blurs of distortion and speed, and the bubble cut out - the captain on guard, and the mage wheezing incredulously about the man's spear through his ribcage.

The warmage ground his teeth through the red froth at his lips, and a different sort of temporal shift curled over the space around them. When it cleared, the three were standing as they had been moments before, when the second-in-command had lunged by. The spear-wielder began to lose balance, surprised to find himself suddenly in motion again, mid-step.

As he caught himself, the mage's sword rammed through his back. So he struck down his would-be killer without hesitation, in the moment of confusion the Rewind had imparted on his foes.

"No!" Yaota cried. She tensed as the distortion overtook them again, leaving the world beyond their few-meter radius suspended in ultra-slow motion.

The mage shook droplets of blood on the dying man, showing his teeth; his eyes shone with disdain. "Out-traded by a traitorous, common-blooded old sow and her dear baby brother… that simply won't do. So you've done a bit of training? You're a cut above the others, but I won't let myself be killed by *peasants* who hold swords in their hands and fancy themselves of warrior rank."

"Tokijirou Kinohiko… !" she growled, and the tired-eyed young nobleman sneered.

[TOKIJIROU KINOHIKO]

He held out one sword. "Have at me, if you will - if you go winning any more trades, we'll simply need to reenact them until the *outcome* is corrected. But if you just stand there, or if you turn tail without defeating me, this fellow will bleed out *long* before a medic from the outside can get to him, even if I leave him as is."

"Swiving brat," she spat, advancing with her sword drawn.

He never stopped smirking. "I only need to win once. How many times in a row do you suppose *you'd* need to triumph, for help to arrive?"

Satsuki knew the name of the younger Tokijirou, even if she had not anticipated his presence here. The man was considerably more dangerous than his father - wielding Time with the utmost finesse, he made formidable a facet of Order arcana known to be notoriously difficult to handle effectively.

Of the few active Time specialists Satsuki knew of, most of them hinged on the Speedsphere and Slowsphere to isolate foes, to defeat them quickly in forced duels or stall them until the caster's allies arrived.

Tokijirou the Younger had gained renown for a mastery of spells that were harder both to cast and to utilize. The style was not omnipotent; he simply boasted extreme powers of foresight, and had honed the ability to track and predict unsuspecting foes' movements and position himself to lure them into his traps.

If Gamagoori were closer, he could channel Chaos to nullify Tokijirou's casting; the fight then would be simple enough. As it was, it would take too long for the shield-bearer to arrive if Satsuki summoned him - more precious time than Yaota had, for certain. The princess *had* considered that neglecting to intervene in Yaota's predicament might prove, in the long term, beneficial. But for the moment, assuming the captain could win another exchange, Yaota could serve to make the fight neater as well.

It was what it was, Satsuki thought, drawing back the arrow she'd nocked. The Speedsphere's surface shimmered, beginning to clear.

In making her way toward the scene a few moments ago, Satsuki had seen Yaota's brother felled before the bubble of Speed sealed around Yaota and Kinohiko again. She had accordingly given up on her sprint, and instead readied the bow, waiting a few beats for her chance to shoot.

Yaota's sword was now buried in Tokijirou Kinohiko's shoulder, as the Time mage snarled in rage. He had dropped the Speedsphere to cast a Rewind instead.

When the combatants blurred back to what would have been seconds prior within the bubble's radius, he did not erect the Speed spell again; unaware of his observer, he was not wasteful enough with his channeling to attempt to recast it so quickly. So in the moment Yaota stumbled at being deposited mid-step, with precognitive precision he was gripping her arm to pull her a bit to the side.

Yaota's abdomen was pierced by a phantom blade - a strike thrown before the Speedsphere had fallen.

And Satsuki's arrow sank into Kinohiko's heart.

She cast aside the bow, stance dropping and arms swinging to preparedness to sprint. *Tora no Yousou!*

The noble mage was dumbfounded as his gaze edged toward her - and Time snapped backward in the area around him.

The radius, he couldn't control. Both he and Yaota were left unharmed, reverting to their earlier positions.

The execution was sloppy, with the fatigue of casting so quickly; erring on the safe side, he'd set them a beat further back than before. He could not attempt to pull the same maneuver to corner Yaota as before, however, as the Kiryuuin princess, ablaze with a dwindling burst of her Aspect, was practically on top of them as the reset completed.

"Wait!" he cried, but she caught the moment his blade grew insubstantial as he faced her, his strike and backward step slyly masked with his façade of fear. Satsuki pivoted low, ducking outside the location where the delayed strike would fall before she rammed her shoulder up into his gut.

In doing so, she knocked him into Yaota at such an angle that the rebel captain was pushed away - just as the same projected attack that had in the previous iteration slain Yaota instead opened Kinohiko's torso.

He could not backtrack more than a few moments, so he seized immediately on the Worldflow and forced the spell again.

When they were placed a third time as they were, the now-practiced Yaota caught her footing and moved well clear of the trap soon to spring; Kinohiko staggered away from them, eyes frantic on the Kiryuuin princess, chest heaving for air. Satsuki, sailing onto the scene again, angled the *Bakuzan* to intercept the third phantom recurrence of the Timeblade's strike, pinpointing it effortlessly after seeing it so many times.

The strike was realized, near invisible - but for sparks that flashed at the Bakuzan's dark surface.

Kinohiko's eyes rounded as the blade in his right hand shattered in the same moment. Destroyed in the past. He dropped the worthless hilt, his look wild, and threw his head side to side.

"There's no way! A-after seeing it just once…?!"

Satsuki walked calmly toward the hunched nobleman, even as he brandished his remaining Timeblade in a shaking threat. "Your renown is not without reason. The blade is stolen by Time so briefly few would notice it vanishing to begin with… but an instant of intersecting with your target's body is enough for the damage to be done. How formidable…"

She faked sharply forward with her shoulders and one foot, and he screeched and thrust the Timeblade out in a panicked move, staggering back. He realized his mistake, with a cold sickness in his gut, as the princess standing a meter clear of the spot calmly tipped the Bakuzan out toward it. Her precision rivaled his.

The sparks buzzed at the black blade, and his remaining sword shattered in another flicker of correcting Time. The sweat on his neck and back beaded cold.

"The precision is nothing short of impressive. You project your blade a certain amount of time into the future, and guide your opponent into place to receive a strike from the past. And they are felled by the weapon flashing into existence - for the briefest duration, existing in conflict with one's body - because the sacred blade's integrity is such as to *win* that conflicting occupation of space. Unfortunately for you…" she began, readying the Bakuzan in both hands. "*This* sacred blade's integrity surpasses that of the Tokijirou sacred arms by a comfortable margin. Fitting, that my Bakuzan should reserve the right to strip the unworthy of their icons of rank."

"P-please, wait-,"

He dodged back to escape the slash for his front - and the princess pressed the attack, flowing seamlessly into a lunge that went well

through his stomach, bursting from his back as blood rained from his lips.

Time skipped backward. He dodged back to escape the slash for his front, and ducked to the side to evade the thrust - and the princess whirled smoothly out of her lunge, hacking a savage slash across his torso.

Time skittered backward. He stumbled back to escape the slash for his front - and the princess lunged for the same angle at which he dodged to the side, running him through.

Time lurched backward. "Mercy!" he wheezed, tripping over his feet as the slash came - and the princess altered her course, reversing her grip and driving the greatsword down through the prone target's gut. He struggled to muster the arcana to save himself, to erase the pain, as tears arced down his gaping face.

"Come now, Tokijirou the Younger," Satsuki said from above him, expression severe. "*You* only need to win once; history is lain down at your pleasure. Rewrite your last stand as many times as you please, and see if the outcome will change to aught you find more palatable."

Time wrenched backward. Satsuki pulled her slash as the man staggered back, retching, and fell to his knees. His eyes were distant, and his shoulders shook as his hands clutched at his hair. "M-mercy," he stammered, shuddering as he retched painfully again.

"Your circuits can't take any more," Satsuki observed. "A Rewind is many times more complex than hastening or slowing time, is it not? It's a miracle your trump card took so many uses to wear through, but it's quite the weakness; the moment you're outmatched, the best you can do is exhaust yourself while you delay the inevitable."

"S-Satsuki-hime," he whimpered, back hunched. "I cannot… best you…"

"Experiencing one's death so frequently must wear on the nerves," Satsuki said, indifferent. "Do you receive premonitions? Are you particularly unnerved to find your true death looming tall before you, or does it all blur together, numb with the pain you can't forget?"

Tears fell from his chin as he gazed up at the princess, awestruck, and shook his head weakly. "The difference between our powers is great; I understand it now. I see that you will overthrow the queen! Let me fight alongside you, for that end!"

Satsuki held his gaze, searching his response to her following words. "I slew Tokijirou Matsuhiko, on this very battlefield."

He started. "I… I followed his orders, but my father was a contemptible man. I *despised* him. If he's gone, all the more natural that I should kneel before you, in gratitude! I'll call off the remaining soldiers - the battle will end, the rebel prisoners will be spared…" He mustered his breath, and bowed his head. "I'll reform, I'll do anything you demand. I beg of you…"

Remarkably, his response was genuine. Satsuki studied the man stooped in the dirt; older than her, younger than Gamagoori, as she placed it, though the lanky fellow was presently sick with fatigue, and his brow was creased with desperation. His skill was undeniable, and his powers versatile; with even further training, he would prove quite the asset.

"Very well," Satsuki said, and his pitiful expression brightened as he looked up at her, admiration plain. "Tokijirou Kinohiko. Bow your head."

The Bakuzan moved for his shoulder, tapping it lightly with the flat.

"Do you swear loyalty to Kiryuuin Satsuki, First Princess of the eternal kingdom?"

"I swear my loyalty to you, Kiryuuin Satsu-,"

She began to lift the Bakuzan away, and flared the Aspect.

The blade split Kinohiko's skull, killing him instantly.

"Gods above!" Yaota cried.

Satsuki withdrew the blade, letting the shell crumple to the dirt. Behind her, Yaota was applying pressure to her brother's wound, but even the urgency of her task could not draw her horrified gaze from the Kiryuuin woman in that moment.

The dormant Junketsu gave a sound - the silent observer letting slip some eerie trill of amusement, or approval.

Satsuki rested the sword on her shoulder, voice hard. "… We've no need of his surrender to win this battle. Look around; as we speak, the Crown forces dwindle with rapidity."

When Yaota said nothing, Satsuki looked away from her again. She tried not to shake. The ride to her castle, the gathering of her troops, and the ride back, headlong into battle. She had never rested. But she needed to draw out her strength a bit longer.

"I could never recruit a Time mage of that caliber," she provided shortly. "I would need to remain constantly on guard around them, always minding where their blades have recently passed, for the ease with which they might assassinate me, let alone my comrades. I will not risk letting in someone with that much potential power over me, not for the sake of mercy. And the only way to kill him for certain was with a strike so decisive as this." She stepped away, before blood that coiled in a mud-grey puddle could reach her boots. "He felt no pain with his true death - of that, I am almost certain."

Yaota lowered her head, teeth clenched. "You're a monster." An unspoken promise, to accompany it: *I'll never trust you.*

Satsuki studied her briefly, wondering again if it would have been more efficient to let her be lost. Having the suspicious captain off her

case might well facilitate her course. Many of Yaota's soldiers had been saved by Satsuki's own blade today; as a whole, they would surely be tractable to following her now. If Satsuki took command of the rebel forces in the region, if she trained them to the level of the superior soldiers of the Legion of Honnouji she'd amassed under the guise of counterinsurgency…

The princess looked to the battlefield again. She should have wasted not a moment before reentering the fray, to make every difference she could. But she was tired - crushingly so. "I cannot let any more than necessary die. I meant to extend my influence through the castle ranks, and eliminate the queen cleanly, in a coup d'état; the troops I gathered should have been called on merely to quash loyalist unrest, in the event of a noblesse revolt in the aftermath. But here I've led them onto some far-off battlefield, and they pledge to follow…"

Satsuki's vision shook. She had overexerted beyond belief. She paused, catching her breath. Then the remorse of her tone faded, all business again.

"Today, we leave a first impression of our strength in this uprising. Our actions here tell the queen she may no longer do as she pleases, and tell the noblesse none remain safe at her side. We will wipe out the remaining Crown soldiers present. The totality of our triumph, the strength of the impression we leave on this day, will feed into recruitment strength moving forward."

Yaota had no words for her still.

"Help your brother. I will command our forces, and send a healer your way. The battle will come to a close shortly."

Head bowing in acquiescence, Yaota lifted a hand to bid her on.

'Surely thou wouldst fall none the worser, for thoroughness…' Junketsu offered glibly. *'And who could fault thy discretion, fierce Junpakko, in the wake of thine heroics on this wretched plain?'*

The princess only shook her head as she started forward, surveying what remained of the battle. Trust aside, Satsuki had earned Yaota's fear, and now even some degree of her respect. If the brother could be saved, Yaota would not deny being indebted. That was all Satsuki required; the captain would pose an obstacle to her no longer.

Humble though it may seem, this is a first step of many. Make no mistake, godwing; what I struck was her heart.

And should I do as I please, even to the expense of the rebellion's current leadership… she thought wryly, catching sight of a distant, human Ryuu and a polearm that crackled with flame as it blew back a ring of foes. *I'll make a very large enemy of a rather useful ally.*

Junketsu rumbled something that may have been a chortle in her ears.

Satisfied, Satsuki took a steadying breath and began to run. Into the thick of it once more, to hasten the final blow.

"She's still just a child, you-!" His voice taut with frustration, the words bitten one note short of the accusation on his tongue. "I can't *believe* this!"

"Yeah?" The answer is gruff. To the girl's senses, the thieves' clipped exchange is a storm. The heated one's normally smooth way of speaking is so charged with emotion that it becomes like forked lightning, slashing the air. The other is colder - his unspoken warning the soft snap of crusted frost waking in a thaw. His impassive calm evokes a frozen lake, the stillness before it swallows a creature whole. "And where do you suppose you're off to at this hour, Aikurou-kun?"

The Sensei is in trouble - he will be, if he treads too far outside the Boss's pleasing. Every footfall in the room ahead vibrates around her, like the hall is a drum.

"I'm going after her!" The sound is everywhere now, and the taste of the air is electric as she trudges forward, heart speeding, tongue flickering an alert rhythm against the roof of her mouth. She reaches the door, pushes on it and drags her nails mindlessly down before recalling the knob she needs to turn.

She's human; she hasn't Changed in a good while. She blinks dully at her shaking fingers, confirming the fact. It's made for bigger hands than hers, but she can turn the knob.

She sees every emotion that darts over the Sensei's face in the next breath, captures even the muted surprise in the second man's chilled eyes. And for a strange string of moments the Boss is studying her, same as she's studying him.

The next word to crash against the air is her moniker; she almost jumps. Then the Sensei is sweeping through the distance between them, dropping to his knees to reach her level. He starts as if to embrace her, but instead looks her over, aghast.

The blood. But he's afraid *for* her, not of her. The mountain lion, her father's eyes and pinched brow- She tries to loosen her fingers on the crusted hilt of the knife, only to find her entire forearm tense from grasping. She blinks. Colors shatter and soften, and everything looks dull until she realizes it looks normal. The hum of the world recedes just a tad further. She blinks again. She'll get dried blood on the flooring…

"I got the…" The dry rasp is hers, the whisper thrumming too loudly across her, as she remembers the bag she carries.

The questions are edging at the sensei's halting breath as he lifts her arm, tugs at the sodden cloth glued about her shoulder. He finds the telltale, too-neat tear in the fabric, and pries it apart.

He runs his hand only once over the red-stained, unbroken skin underneath - and rests it there, expression newly taut even as relief

mists in his eyes. "You're in shock, Ryuu. Let's - let's get this stitched up."

There's no wound left. And the man behind her mentor has drawn near and, despite the Sensei's quick thinking, has already glimpsed as much and ticked up a brow. But he only stoops to retrieve the sack, watching the small Ryuu watch him as he takes it. He peers inside, fishes through the contents.

"Well, I'll be," the Tongue-Cutter drawls with a smirk. "Get a story out of her, would ya, Aikurou-kun? Your girl's nailed her first job. I'd just like to know who she killed."

When he takes her up a once-forbidden stretch of Middle City street, she can only smile.

Maybe it's because she woke up with her head sorted out enough to bask in the sense of her success. Maybe it's because the thieflord she knows to favor leather armor and hoods looks so different in his dressy clothes. Maybe it's simply that, as her instinctive fear of this side of town settles and she follows dutifully at his side, she sees the adventure in their stroll. She can't stop tasting the air for danger, but her eyes are enough to tell her the air is different than what she's been told to expect.

Rival turf, to be trod with the utmost caution. Certainly, a guild won't be felt in every shop and hovel and stall; not every eye belongs to their foes. But those few whose eyes catch on the intruding thieflord a moment too long, only to flee him a touch too quickly, don't consider him as prey. Not even for a moment.

The Tongue-Cutter's reputation precedes him as he requires. He's dangerous. Fellow hands of the underground don't dare cross his path. So he strolls with brazen nonchalance up the weathered road, inviting any to challenge his boots upon the heart of their turf.

The small Ryuu walks with him. A place she couldn't go alone, and none will so much as look at her wrong now. The idea, the simplicity of playing the hierarchy, leaves her quietly giddy.

Her Boss walks with power. And in this moment, so does she.

The Boss seats himself at a shaded table outside a café, waves for the girl to join him. He flicks open a menu before sliding it to her, eyes flitting over their surroundings as he does. His routine scans are furtive, easy to miss; his exterior is all nonchalance. She realizes the Sensei might name it another type of mask, a tool of the trade - and yet their Boss's easy *confidence* is every bit as real, and warranted, as his caution.

"Get what you like, kiddo. Reward for your first job."

Fruit juice sounds delightful. It also sounds childish, and she decides she's not some wide-eyed brat fresh out of the wilderness anymore. She orders a coffee drink that she hopes she pronounces correctly, and it arrives with sprinkles and wafers and cream. She spoons carefully at the treat, surprised to find it icy and cold, while the Boss sips a steaming mug across from her, his gaze idling on the sunbaked street.

A different man than the nervous fellow who served the drinks emerges from the curtained doorway of the shop, setting a course for their table. He looms a measured two paces away, hair slick and hands tucked behind a straight back, and Ryuu wonders if he's the owner of the shop, then wonders belatedly if she ought to be studying him as she is or following her Boss's disinterested lead. But his face is severe - rough in a way that clashes with his neat vest and half-apron, much like the Tongue-Cutter in his business wear - and a scowl wars at his mouth before he speaks.

"Afternoon, Boss."

"Well met, Boss."

Ryuu's Boss doesn't even bother to meet the other boss's eyes. The man glances in annoyance at her curious face, and back to the Tongue-Cutter again. "You babysitting these days?"

He scoffs, swirling the black drink around his glass mug. "I'm sure you wouldn't interrupt a customer's drink without a point to make. So get to it. Pull up a chair," he offers, beckoning.

A crease of annoyance on the brow; he doesn't take the invitation to sit. His voice is a hiss, a conversational flurry of needles, quick and clear. "We haul a body from the alleys one night, and the next afternoon you're strolling up my streets and perusing my shops. You wanna know how many stab wounds he had? Or do you know already? If you've got a point to make, I'm all ears."

"Easy, Boss," the seated man says, his smile scathing in its amicable peace. "We're not hitmen. None of mine would off one'a yours. Not *unprovoked*, that is." He fishes coin from his purse, leaving *rin* enough on the table for the drinks and a fair tip. "Glad your barista hasn't lost her touch… You lucky sods. Can't find a mug like this in our neighborhood, that's for sure. Nothing but the cheap stuff…"

The local boss tries not to flinch as the Tongue-Cutter stands. "Come along, Ryuu-kun. We're done here."

"If you know something-," the other man starts after him, warning. And only then does Ryuu's boss meet his eyes.

"I know that if your goons try to play the boundaries and pick off *my* hard-earned goods from *my* hands, our answers won't be so friendly. We don't want to meddle in each other's business, now do we, Boss?"

His face is pale enough to rival his clenched teeth. "He would *never* have…"

"Ah, Ryuu-kun - give that toy of his back, would you?"

"Sure thing, Boss!" Ryuu hops from her seat with the affirmative chirp. So the silently fuming boss truly considers the child for the first time as she deposits a neat cloth bundle on the table, by the empty glasses and rin.

The rookie catches up to her Boss as he slinks from the shaded café and onto the sunlit street, leaving the other to unfold the kerchief around the dead man's filthy knife on the table.

~ ~

Strike the Heart

End

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